

Facing up to the future with confidence



How well prepared are RSLs to ride out the challenges of some very rough times ahead?

Over the last few months, the impact of the quickly deteriorating economic situation has become increasingly clear to all – including the social housing sector.

Meanwhile the pressures remain to deliver resident services at the levels planned and expected of them. The organisation must respond. How can RSLs deal with a fast changing risk profile? Are their underlying key business systems and processes capable of responding? Does management have the capability and capacity to deal with the new agenda being created?

In this fast changing business environment RSLs are evaluating their most obvious risks:

- Significant pressures on net spend targets – arrears going up as residents can't pay
- Impacts of reducing costs on a largely fixed cost base
- Increased demands on community services
- Added pressures on supply of social housing as a safety net for repossessions
- Key supplier failure e.g. in maintenance
- Contractor failure in construction projects
- Shared ownership – low sales as clients can't get a mortgage
- Development funding risk – sales volume and selling prices down
- Financial control – the risk of fraud increases exponentially in a downturn

- Compliance failure – reductions in labour spend impacting standards on e.g. health and safety

The real purpose of risk management is the identification of, and validation of the analysis of likelihood and impact of future events.

- Understanding the underlying causes of risk
- Testing the validity of assumptions
- Making choices in risk response options
- The importance of integrity and prudence in decision making

These good risk management practices become essential components of a solid process for coping with events. Those RSLs without a good track record in these areas will struggle.

Organisations which have invested in good systems and processes, both financial and operational, will come to recognise the wisdom of their investment. Time to take stock!

History shows that in times of crises the organisation's focus changes as does the consequent workload for systems and staff groups. Data needs become more frequent in order to manage more frequent changes in activity, especially those where small movements have now become more

critical. The real test for many RSLs will be the adaptability of systems and the ability of staff to respond to the increasing pace of change.

In previous downturns the logic of down-sizing meant too many senior people left. The organisation lost expertise, knowledge, judgement and experience – characteristics required to help navigate through the most difficult period faced for 20 years. There is a reason that the last person off a boat is the captain.

Frank Hailstones, Frankham Risk Management



FRANKHAM

Contents

Editorial	2
TSA	2
Innovation	
Waste doctor on call	3
EPC data	4
Managing change	5
Review	
Beyond decent homes	6
Value for money in DLOs	7
Safety and regulation	
Asbestos	8
Electrical inspection	8
Tree risk	9
Changes for gas safety	10
Building relationships	
Procurement	11
Green Future	
Sustainable homes	12
Rethinking construction	13
NHMF Award winners	14
Customer care is dead!	16

Editorial



The Tenant Services Authority is putting tenants' interests first. To deliver, maintenance practitioners will need to raise the profile of maintenance within social housing organisations. There is no argument that this is the service our tenants care about the most.

For years the NHMF has seen maintenance as the "Cinderella" service. HA boards and chief executives seem to be more interested in development and growth, despite the fact that the most common cause of failure lies in maintenance and asset management and the financial problems they can lead to.

Why do we rarely find maintenance experts at the top of housing organisations, including regulators?

Could it be that we are not attracting the brightest brains into the delivery of these vital services? The most talented can earn a great deal more working in the private sector for one of the big contractors, so part of the answer might lie in changing the way we are paid. Maintenance budgets are huge and quite small improvements in quality and performance can result in big savings in cost. In a performance based culture, that should result in pay incentives to attract the best talent.

After the perennial themes of getting closer to our tenants and contract management, the strongest theme running through our conference this year was how we tackle carbon emissions.

The cost of the technology is falling all the time: condensing boilers cost little more at current prices than we were paying for their less efficient predecessors. Once a feature becomes standard, economies of scale kick in, bringing the price down to more acceptable levels. This only happened on boilers when building regulations required them to be more efficient. Judgement will be needed in deciding how quickly to introduce greater energy savings as part of a major repairs programme. Doing it now would be extremely costly. The current rent regime does not allow any of the cost to be passed on to the tenant to reflect the reductions in their energy bills.

The NHMF and HAMMAR South West are funding the Federation to write a best practice guide on contract management with practical advice aimed at maintenance professionals. We plan to make this a major theme at next year's conference. See you there!

Dave Treanor, NHMF Secretary



Published by M3 Housing on behalf of NHMF

NHMF MAINTENANCE CONFERENCE

26th and 27th January 2010
Stratford upon Avon



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TSA



The Tenant Service Authority was set up late last year as the new regulator for social housing in England to raise the standard of services through a well-governed sector that puts tenants first.

By spring 2010, we plan to become responsible for all affordable housing, whether it's provided by local authorities, housing associations or arms length management organisations (ALMOs). In regulating across the domain, it is vital that from kick off we place the T in TSA at the very heart of everything we do.

Our remit from Government is very clear - put tenants and tenants' interests first. To deliver on this, we will be implementing new standards to ensure tenants get the best service and opportunities for involvement.

We knew that tenant input would be the best way to do this, so we are talking to tenants about what they want from these standards. Since the start of this year, we've been talking to tenants through our National Conversation - the biggest ever consultation exercise for social housing tenants.

Whilst we are developing our new ways of working we will continue to regulate using the older powers of the Housing Corporation, but with an unapologetic focus on financial viability during these difficult economic times. Once we have completed the consultation on the new framework, we will turn on the extra powers in the 2008 Housing and Regeneration Act that established the TSA. Those powers provide us with a much better 'toolkit' to intervene to get things sorted for the benefit of tenants.

www.tenantservicesauthority.org



Waste doctor on call



Pressure is on local authorities to increase recycling rates

Across boroughs and counties, waste teams are working hard to educate residents, businesses and other organisations to manage their day-to-day waste more effectively and sort out their food waste from cardboard, from plastics, tins and bottles.

If councils are to attain their recycling targets they must make waste management and especially recycling easy. However, for those not living kerbside this immediately poses a problem.

Historically residents living in low, medium and high rise properties have been expected to place waste in receptacles quite some distance from their door step. This is a disincentive; participation rates are low and waste that could be recycled is placed into landfill waste streams leading to issues with blocked chutes and overflowing paladin bins that in turn produce litter around estates and a food source for vermin.

To get round this problem it is important to reach out to the residents directly. Connaught Environmental has trialled two schemes in London: in the Royal Borough of Kingston and in Clapham Park, where they have taken a very direct approach.

Connaught Environmental set up a bespoke service to collect the recycling materials from the doorstep of flats. To make sure residents knew what to put out, a 'waste doctor' visited individual homes to educate, inform and provide simpler methods.

The waste doctor is an education process

which became the driving factor for a very successful system provided in conjunction with collection rounds. Throughout the week the team knocks on doors and talks directly to residents about how they manage their domestic waste and recycling. Where residents are not recycling or placing the wrong items in sacks, the team actively try to communicate with them at the time of collection in order to provide them with guidance on how, when and what to recycle.

This kind of approach gets results and builds confidence in the community that the issue of waste is being taken seriously

The waste service has to reach out to every tenant, resident and homeowner, working with the community to provide an effective solution. Too often, the traditional bin man has given way to waste operatives who no longer engage with the community.

- 1 The resident places commingled recyclate (plastics, paper and metals) and glass separately into orange recycling sacks.
- 2 The sacks are then placed outside the front door on a pre-designated day of the week when collection is due to be carried out at their address (residents will have received promotional material - including leaflets and fridge magnets - detailing what day of the week sacks will be collected)
- 3 The team collect the orange sacks on the designated day and place them in a dedicated 3.5 tonne collection vehicle for transportation to a waste transfer



station located for distribution into recycling streams

- 4 The total number of sacks collected at each location is entered onto the teams PDA to assist in providing statistical analysis. This provided the foundation to the scheme, which was followed up with the education process provided by the waste doctor.

Connaughts have consistently removed around 1,850 bags a week from the doorsteps of 1,966 properties in Clapham. The borough has seen participation rates in excess of 90%, and since the start of the project levels of collection have increased by over 450%.

In Kingston it was a similar story. Participation rates reached around 70% collecting 988 sacks of commingled recyclate and 222 sacks of glass every week. This adds up to around two tonnes of waste per week being redirected away from landfill and into recycling streams.

This approach educates the residents, helps achieve recycling targets and if it is managed efficiently, is cost effective too. But it also means a return to the traditional values of the 'dustman' engaging with the tenants.

Jonathan Goose, Connaught



EPCs: making use of the data



EPC surveys are gathering valuable information about your stock. How can you make sure it will be available?

The obligation for landlords to provide prospective tenants with an Energy Performance Certificate (EPC) as part of the process of letting a property was introduced in October 2008. And from what we can gauge, there appears to be a high level of compliance. So in this context the requirement seems to be meeting its aim and prospective tenants are getting to see an energy report about their property.

What benefit does the EPC provide? While clearly it provides information, most people will accept a tenancy offered to them without reference to the EPC as it is housing need that is the overriding issue rather than energy efficiency.

If it is open for debate whether the EPC provides a specific benefit to the tenant, does it provide one to the housing provider? And is there a risk that this benefit will be missed?

Social housing providers have for a long time been required to be aware of the energy efficiency of their stock:

- Annual reporting of the average SAP
- Ensuring the thermal element of the decency of the stock
- Making sure that dwellings are not at risk of a Category 1 hazard in respect of excess cold
- Calculating whether low income and vulnerable tenants can afford to live in their managed dwellings

Energy Performance Certificates provide a fantastic opportunity to obtain high quality detailed information about the energy characteristics of managed

dwellings alongside the obligation to provide them to tenants.

It is a great opportunity – but it needs some planning.

The starting point is probably “who are you using to collect your data and issue your EPCs?” If it is collected in-house then you control the process. If it is an external contractor it will largely depend on how specific your contract with them is and what it includes.

The minimum requirement is to issue and provide the EPC on an agreed timescale to enable the landlord to provide it to the prospective tenant. The next step will be to ask for the data that was used to create the EPC as well. This is clearly a sensible step but not as straightforward as you might assume.

Every reasonable contractor is likely to agree to supply the data they used to create the EPC – but is it useable? Where and how can you store it? Is it compatible with your existing data? How does your asset management system or energy database want the data? Will it involve transcribing or re-keying – potentially time consuming and risking errors?

I have spoken to many social landlords who have taken the sensible approach to ask for the data, but have then ended up with meaningless spreadsheets or piles of Word documents that are of no value at all.

Although Energy Performance Certificates are created using a standardised dataset called RDSAP the way that two pieces of software may record it may be completely different from one another. The

Accreditation Schemes in England & Wales and Northern Ireland and the Protocol Schemes in Scotland will have their own approach to how they code and record RDSAP. They have obligations to create software that is approved to create EPCs but it may or may not integrate with your database.

You can avoid losing energy data by taking some action right now. To assist you in this process I have come up with a number of questions:

- 1 Where do you keep your energy data? Is it an asset management system or a standalone energy database?
- 2 Are you thinking of changing your asset management system in the near future?
- 3 Does the provider of your asset management system / energy database integrate with one of the Accreditation Scheme software systems?
- 4 Who produces the EPCs? Which Accreditation Scheme do the Domestic Energy Assessors (DEAs) belong to?
- 5 Could the DEAs producing my EPCs transfer to an Accreditation scheme that integrates with my database?
- 6 What would cost more changing my asset management system or changing the accreditation of my DEAs?

Richard Macphail,
National Energy Services



National Energy Services

Time for change



“Change is disturbing when it is done to us, exhilarating when it is done by us”

Rosabeth Moss Kanter

For organisations to survive, change management is an essential tool. Social, technical or economic forces drive the organisation forward. The myth is that an ostrich will bury its head in the sand as a defence mechanism; a stupid strategy as this would leave 98% of its body exposed. Why then do we tolerate the same approach within organisations? We can't ignore progress. If we are wise we will embrace it or more importantly plan and control it.

“Only 4% of an organisation's problems are known by top management, 9% are known by middle management, 74% by supervisors and 100% by employees.”

Sidney Yoshida

From business reengineering to change management the principles are 'Don't play at it and don't fail'. If you have a narrow focus you will fail; if you don't recognise an important change principle is leadership skills you will fail; if you are scared of rocking the boat you will fail; if you have an agenda saying that we want to provide the best services to our customers' you will win.

A few points to consider:

- Only processes can be reengineered and before you can do this you must identify them.
- Change should be a vision shared at all levels within the organisation.
- A good change manager could be able to save you money, not by reducing quality but improving it.
- Don't over analyse where you are, as you need to invest your time in where you want to be, not about where you have come from.

- Be wary of the consultant who will only tell you what is wrong and not how to put it right.
- Leadership is needed; you can delegate the task but not the vision and drive.
- Ensure IT projects are sanctioned with solutions brought in which are compatible, can be interfaced, have a mobile solution (repairs), processes aligned and have good communication with the user and those who will receive the service.
- Stay focussed and within time limits.
- The change manager cannot avoid conflict and cannot fail to have an inclusive approach.
- Find out what both employees and customers need.
- Seek out what the perception is of the organisation and then act on it.

Employ someone to do a health check or employ a consultant highlighting “this is our strategic vision – what can we do to make this happen.” Change is not about making staff redundant it's about making processes more efficient.

“If you want to build a ship, don't drum up people to collect wood and don't assign those tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea.”

Antoine de Saint-Exupery

The current economic climate is a reality check for businesses. Change at times has high initial costs specifically with IT but this does not have to be the case.

Suppliers are just as hard hit as organisations, therefore be prepared to negotiate prices around what you can pay not how much you are told to pay. Look

at your procurement agreements, contracts and even VAT implications. You may find change can become quite lucrative. Organisations with DLOs sometimes look at the external market when reengineering a DLO would be far more cost effective.

Think outside the box and look at areas such as synergy, partnering, sharing of services and resources as well as facilities, tenant participation, apprenticeships, mobile and flexible working and forging alliances with competitors. Don't be conned by those who say “We have always done it this way and it works”, as what they are trying to say is that “We don't know any other way”.

Change can be a powerful driver for excellence but it needs to be managed, communicated and meet strategic, market and financial requirements.

Managers, staff and suppliers understand why change is necessary and in many cases cry out for it. Everyone is clear that there are uncertain times ahead which may have impacts on jobs or businesses providing reduced services. But you can't not tackle problems.

“Change is the law of life. And those who look only to the past or present are certain to miss the future.”

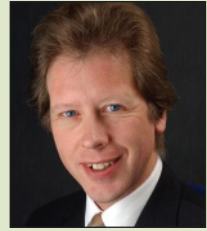
John F. Kennedy

www.pmcde.co.uk

Richard Barker, PMCDE Limited



Beyond the decent homes standard



The decent homes standard should be reached by 2010. What happens next?

Introduced in the year 2000, the Decent Homes Standard has driven much of housing policy in the last decade. Although an English standard, it prompted parallel standards in Scotland and Wales. Councils across Britain have had to prepare plans to prove that they can afford to maintain their housing stock to achieve these standards in time to meet the governments deadline of 2010 (in England). They have been encouraged to look at stock transfers, the Private Finance Initiative and Arms Length Management Organisations. Housing associations have also had to prove that they have plans to meet the deadline.

At the frontline of housing maintenance the focus has been on how the standard needs to be interpreted. The Decent Homes Standard has four elements, all of them "sound bite" promises; a decent house must meet the current statutory minimum standard; it must be in a reasonable state of repair; it must offer reasonably modern facilities and services; and it must provide a reasonable degree of thermal comfort. The problem with sound bites is that they lack the detail needed to specify work. What does "reasonable" mean in these promises? Which facilities and services need to be modern? So it was no surprise that government has issued guidance on what these high level promises really mean. And this guidance has turned out to be complex, and at times controversial.

This guidance has been revised several times, most recently in 2006. As we approach the 2010 deadline, attention is turning to what happens next?

Will there be a further revision? Will there be a new deadline for landlords which have not yet met the Decent Homes Standard?

What follows is pure speculation. It is very likely that there will be a further revision of the guidance issued later this year. A recent report from CLG points to seven areas of "clarification" which could be made in new guidance. These are all fairly minor changes, of which the most significant is a suggestion that the standard will no longer require flats in between other flats to have cavity wall insulation.

Other changes mooted in the report cover tenant refusals for access for surveys, how voids should be recorded (a non-decent void still counts as non-decent), clarification about when

proposed demolitions can be removed from the non-decent count, and more advice on estimating HHSRS failures, particularly failures caused by cold and dampness. There is a welcome re-emphasis that landlords should not need to count as non-decent properties where it is impractical to reach the standard but which are otherwise acceptable. More disappointing is a discussion about removing component lifetimes (so that a decent home would be judged on whether components were in poor condition, regardless of their age). Landlords repair properties which are in disrepair, however old the component might be. CLG seems to be taking a different approach, concluding that variations in landlord approaches are "reasonable" and that no action is required on this point.

The CLG report only looked at areas where their national house condition survey suggests different levels of non-decency than landlord's own figures. But if new guidance is to be produced, will it not go further than these seven points? Surely CLG will look at our impact on sustainability. The recently issued Heat and Energy Saving Consultation sets a target for a 30% saving of carbon emissions from housing, and talks about the social sector leading the way. Ever higher insulation levels may help. Water saving measures also have a part to play in contributing to sustainability. The whole debate on "retrofitting" existing homes, how much it costs, and who will pay for it is still in its early days. And there are a raft of other more practical issues which most asset managers have always found to be surprising omissions; lifts, communal safety and the lack of clear guidance about what counts as an acceptable kitchen layout.

In the whole debate Decent Homes delivery has moved from CLG to the HCA, the TSA and the Housing Inspectorate. Politicians' interest in housing is focussed on the "housing crisis" of falling house prices, mortgage lending and the problems of the housebuilders. Apart from the impetus towards energy saving, I fear we are seeing a drift of attention away from our existing social housing stock, and back towards development. Well, maybe that will offer us a quieter life, with a breathing space to concentrate on our own priorities and the local aspirations of our own residents!

Greg Trimmer, Trimmer CS



Value for money in DLOs



How can you show your DLO is offering good value?

Short of tendering everything on a regular basis, how can a DLO demonstrate to its parent organisation and regulators that it is providing good value? There is no definitive answer but long experience suggest there are some key factors that affect how well DLOs are managed to provide good value.

Income stability is a major plus for any contracting organisation. It is doubly so for DLOs with relatively fixed costs. In most cases materials and sub-contracting are the only short-term variable costs of significance. Some DLOs have managed to be effective trading organisations but for every success I can cite dozens that get into difficulties. The most stable income is responsive repairs and void work. Good DLOs generally concentrate on this core work. Any external or short term contract work needs risk assessment and to answer the following questions:

- How is this advantaging your organisation?
- How do you deal with customer conflicts?
- What happens when the work comes to an end?

Good DLOs use a range of cost benchmarks. Void costs analysed by type of work (such as repair, improvement, safety checking) and compared with others can be very useful. Average repair costs say something but the real comparator is the average cost of the 85% or so of the lowest costs repairs. This benchmark excludes the distortions produced by the 5% or so of jobs that typically consume about 30% of the budget. At the 85% level we can be fairly sure that the same kinds of work are contained in the benchmark. Most importantly good DLOs go out and talk to benchmarking partners

and are self-critical not self-justifying.

Good DLOs know their demand and how it sits against national norms. Responsive repairs average about 3.25 to 3.75 repairs per home per annum or 4 to 4.25 with gas breakdowns. It may be just fine if your demand is higher or lower than this but you need to know why. Traditionally deprived urban populations generate more demand than rural and better off households. Poor call handling can often generate low demand as people give up trying to order repairs and these people do not show up in most satisfaction polling.

Good DLOs

- Average fewer than 8 calendar days to complete all categories of repair
- Do 80% of work at the first visit
- Have less than 3% of jobs that take longer than 28 calendar days
- Offer appointments for most jobs at first contact – and keep them!
- Turn round voids at better than £250/day plus 3 days, i.e. £2000 spend = 11 days
- Measure tenant feedback in more than one way and in ways that poll as many tenant groups as possible

Good managers concentrate on looking at dissatisfaction and complaints. You cannot do anything to improve your service by looking at satisfied customers. Try to find out how many people do not report repairs because getting through to your repairs centre is too frustrating.

Good DLOs manage performance actively at every level and they do it regularly. For tradespeople that is daily and weekly.

Good DLOs have positive answers to the questions below:

- Why do we use a schedule of rates/open book or whatever to value work?
- Do we know our job history?
- Is our income secure for the next five years?
- Do operatives know what performance is expected of them?
- Can our supervisors supervise?
- Do we know where we are making surplus/loss?
- Has everyone a grasp of the basic statistics?
- How many jobs – day/week/month/year?
- How we do things?
- Can we estimate our week's performance accurately by Friday evening or Monday morning
- Have we got records that show how this operation is managed?

There remains the problem that what DLOs do are specialist functions. Real skill is required, not just to confirm you are offering value but to convince the non-specialist. The Housing Quality Network are currently developing an accreditation scheme for DLOs to offer an expert assessment of the quality of a DLO.

Rob McNaughton, Housing Quality Network



Asbestos

In 2006 over 4,000 people died as a result of past asbestos exposure in the UK



It is estimated that over fifty percent of these deaths occurred as a result of exposure from within the construction industry many developing the disease as a result of installing asbestos in buildings including housing in the 1950 and 1960s.

Over the years the Health and Safety Executive have introduced ever increasing controls on asbestos this culminating in the 2006 Control of Asbestos Regulations (CAR). Social landlords are subject to specific requirements for the managements of asbestos in the common areas of blocks, and little clear guidance for dwellings.

Landlords must ensure that all persons at the risk of disturbing asbestos have asbestos awareness training. How do you ensure that your contractors have had this

training and are not going to disturb asbestos within your properties? Do you advise them where the asbestos is? Do you tell them to be vigilant for asbestos? Or do you require them to prove that the staff they are sending into your premises are asbestos aware? All valid approaches but which is right?

Shortly the HSE will be publishing new guidance, and for the first time this will cover the requirements for surveying domestic properties.

In summary the guidance is that you should:

- 1 Identify archetypes or beacons based upon property design and construction
- 2 Survey sufficient archetypes to ensure you have identified all asbestos within the beacon
- 3 Once you have done this, inspect all other properties within the archetype group to ensure the asbestos is in good condition.

A sizable exercise for any housing association, local authority or landlord.

But what do you do with the data? How do you manage it? Importantly, who do you tell and how? The issue of advising tenants sends fear into many organisations, but simple statements in your tenant's pledges requirement such as "duty of care" or "providing a safe environment" will mean that this issue can no longer be fudged.

In recent weeks we have seen a 17 year old being diagnosed with mesothelioma. Her source of exposure is yet to be determined. The suggestion is that the exposure will have come from either school or the home.

When such a case arises in the housing sector will you be able to defend your actions and approach?

John Richards, Thames Labs



Managing tree risk

Appropriate tree management systems limit legal exposure



The law is clear: any organisation maintaining land on which trees are located should have proactive systems in place. Employees, tenants, members of the public nor property should not be exposed to unreasonable risk. In the event a tree fails, a lack of appropriate systems could lead to prosecution.

Inspections

You should proactively report on the condition of trees. If there are no defects present this should be noted. If you have undertaken a tree survey and have not recorded when a tree is defect free how would you demonstrate that it had been subject to a thorough inspection in the event it subsequently failed? Furthermore, it is advised that a record is made of the risk associated with the trees. This approach ensures that re-inspections are appropriate to the risk ensuring that trees

close to targets (roads, bus stops, children's play areas, falling distance of tenant's houses etc) are inspected more frequently than those located away from such targets. This approach is reasonable, aligned with the HSE SIM, and saves money.

Tenant's gardens

Areas of public open space represent the greatest risk, but many RSLs maintain trees within tenant's gardens. One option in prioritising the area of tenant's gardens is to generate a register of properties with or without trees. This will facilitate prioritisation for inspection and can also be referenced to areas of high risk, for example, tenant gardens next to A roads being inspected more frequently than those next to B roads.

Publicising information on the management of trees through specific leaflets, or in the resident's newsletter may also help to demonstrate that your organisation has an understanding of the issues involved.

Tree works

Without doubt the greatest risk is from accidents whilst tree surgery works are being undertaken. Failure to have appropriate systems in place would not be defensible in the event an accident occurred. Having current insurance certificates would not constitute effective management in this area.

Additional Benefits

A proactive system delivers additional benefits. You may be able to manage your subsidence risk, deliver long term sustainability goals, enhance resident estates and take control of the long term financial implications of tree management. Managing your tree stock does not have to be a complicated process, but requires attention to detail to ensure that it is correctly set up and managed. In this way you help limit your organisations exposure in law.

Keiron Hart, Marishal Thompson Group

Periodic inspection, testing and reporting



Landlords must ensure that a tenant's electrical installation starts and continues to be safe and serviceable throughout the tenancy

A Periodic Inspection is an inspection on the condition of an existing electrical installation, to identify any deficiencies against the National standard, BS 7671 (IEE Wiring Regulations) for the safety of electrical installations.

A periodic inspection should:

- Reveal if any of your electrical circuits or equipment are overloaded
- Find any potential electrical shock risks and fire hazards in your electrical installation,
- Identify any defective DIY electrical work,

- Highlight any lack of earthing or bonding, and
- Identify departures from the National standard (BS 7671).

Tests are also carried out on the electrical installation to check that it is safe. The electrician carrying out the inspection will

provide a periodic inspection report (PIR) to record the findings of the inspection and testing. The PIR has schedules of inspection and test results which should be kept adjacent the consumer unit.

Periodic inspection report observations and recommendations

The overall assessment sections of the report should describe the overall condition as either 'satisfactory', in which case no immediate remedial work is required, or 'unsatisfactory' which means remedial work is required to make the installation safe to use.

Each observation should be accompanied by a recommendation code to indicate the action needed.

- Code 1 Requires urgent attention
- Code 2 Requires improvement
- Code 3 Requires further investigation
- Code 4 Does not comply with BS 7671

The recommended interval until the next inspection should be made conditional upon all the Code 1 and Code 2 departures being rectified without undue delay.

Frequency of Periodic Inspections

For rented accommodation the Electrical Safety Council recommends that periodic inspection and testing is carried out at least every 5 years or on the change of tenancy. Housing organisations that keep an up-to-date record of the condition of their housing stock and work to a written maintenance programme and periodic

testing regime may be in position to justify a longer period between periodic inspection and tests.

We recommend that you use a registered electrician who is approved to carry out Periodic Inspection Reporting. Further guidance is available at www.esc.org.uk

Steve Hesketh, Electrical Safety Council



Changes for gas safety



There is a new gas registration body in Great Britain and the Isle of Man. Gas Safe Register™ replaces the CORGI gas register, which ended on 31 March

Under the Gas Safety (Installation and Use) Regulations 1998 landlords are legally responsible for gas safety in all their rented accommodation.

It remains a legal requirement for landlords to have an annual safety check on all gas appliances, pipework and flues provided in a rental property. However, since 1 April 2009 a Gas Safe registered engineer, not a CORGI installer, must carry out the safety check.

Gas Safety Certificate

The Landlord Gas Safety Record or CP12 will be valid until their expiry date (even if that date is later than 1st April 2009). Any gas safety record given to you after 1st April 2009 will only be valid if the engineer is on the Gas Safe Register. There is no dual running of the schemes.

Always ask for the card

All Gas Safe registered engineers have an ID card with their licence number and a photograph. Please ask to see the card before allowing the engineer to undertake gas work in the property and encourage your tenants to do the same.

The licence number is easily verified on the website or by phone.

Anyone can find or check a Gas Safe registered engineer 24 hours a day, 7 days a week online at www.GasSafeRegister.co.uk or call 0800 408 5500.

Install an audible carbon monoxide alarm

Carbon monoxide is produced by faulty gas appliances and can be deadly. It is poisonous but has no odour or visibility, so an audible carbon monoxide alarm is the only way to detect harmful levels in the property.

If your tenants smell gas or think there might be a gas leak, instruct them to turn off the gas at the meter, extinguish flames, open windows and leave the area.

National Gas Emergency Service:
0800 111 999

No to DIY

Neither you nor your tenants should ever attempt to install or repair a gas appliance. Only ever use a Gas Safe registered engineer to carry out gas work in the property.

If you suspect a gas appliance isn't working correctly, turn it off and contact a Gas Safe registered engineer for advice.

Jeff Learman, Gas Safe Register



Checkprice

All subscribers to the NHF Schedule of Rates can benchmark their tender returns against their peers for free

Checkprice gives you instant feedback on how your tenders compare by size of organisation or by region



Go to www.m3h.co.uk, click on NHF Schedule of Rates

Procurement finished equals job done?



Good performance and delivery in a contract depends on the relationship between the parties

Contractors are as individual as customers. What's more, completing the procurement process successfully does not guarantee successful contract delivery. That requires a deep understanding of the contract by both client and contractor. Both sides need to monitor measurable targets that include current service levels, but most importantly they need to develop strong relationships. Could it be that simple?

Equal responsibility is actually the corner stone of any strong relationship. Naturally each party will bring their own strengths and weaknesses, but ultimately with an understanding of each other's expectations a successful relationship can flourish.

In some instances cracks have started to appear in a number of client/contractor relationships. There are many reasons why this can happen, but in order to prevent contracts from falling by the wayside it's important to look at areas that cause the commonest problems.

Often the procurement process is administered by a consultant operating on behalf of a housing provider. However, from the outset a client and the contractor need to understand the contract drawn up and make sure it meets their local needs. All too often contracts can be overcomplicated and that can lead to one or both parties not fully understanding the agreement. As a result, misinterpretation of areas such as service levels or cost savings can occur – perhaps they haven't even been stated from the outset. Expectations need to be clearly defined and well understood by all parties.

Both sides need to contribute to

developing a robust relationship. It takes confidence to constructively challenge the service and seek innovation going forward. Relationships take time and effort to build. It is essential to understand what effort you are putting into relationship building and with whom and at what level. Relationships which developed during the procurement process can be brought to an end or enhanced during the delivery phase.

For example during the procurement process you could develop an extensive relationship with a procurement consultant which may end with the process. What effort is invested to understand the potential contractor/service provider where a relationship may last 15 years or more?

Establishing a contract where all parties understand the requirements enables confidence to grow

Parties should be mindful that such confidence needs to be managed consistently throughout all levels of the business, from management and staff through to residents. This will allow everyone to work well together both operationally and strategically.

It is essential that this courtship is based on mutual trust and that means establishing expectations, so that contractors buy into landlord agendas like worklessness, E&D, community cohesion, the environment.

It is also key that TUPE and supply chain agreement are totally understood and

that systems as well as people are the right fit. Be honest from the outset if there are staffing issues that need to be addressed. It is better tackled jointly than trying to use TUPE as a short term fix. Not enough partnerships are completely honest so they may start with a feeling of mistrust from all sides. They need transparency, regular client/contractor dialogue and workshops that involve all parties.

These are necessary, not just to check KPIs and benchmarking the SLA – although important – but also to share positive practice and ensure issues are jointly addressed and seek innovation to drive the service forward. The residents as the end users need to be threaded through all aspects of any successful relationship. We all need to understand how tenants influence not just the procurement process but the ongoing governance of any contract.

This process is fundamental to the successful delivery of a contract. Ultimate success or failure depends on good communications from the outset and the development of strong, open, honest and trusting relationships. So rather than dusting off that prenuptial, why not get it right from the start. Ask questions, be honest with each other, do things together. In that way hopefully you'll be setting up a contract made in heaven and not paving the way to a marriage from hell.

Alison Brown, Mears Group





From decent homes to sustainable housing



In unprecedented times we've run out of credit and we are facing environmental Armageddon so by 2050 we have to get out of the bad habit of using carbon-based fuels

Reducing the material environmental impact of our existing homes is the domain of the maintenance team.

To convert a Decent Home into a sustainable home you need to take a radically different approach to materials use. Unfortunately Decent Homes, costly though it may have been, merely took our housing stock to the lowest acceptable standard.

Reducing fuel consumption

Super-insulation is a must. That means very low U-values for roofs, walls, floors, windows and doors.

W/m2K	Decent Homes	Sustainable
Roof	0.16 - 0.25	0.10 - 0.13
Wall	0.35 - 2.30	0.10 - 0.15
Floor	0.20 - 1.50	0.10 - .015
Door/Window *	1.80 - 3.00	0.80 - 1.50

Solid walls are difficult and expensive to insulate, but the technology is improving all the time and we have achieved these standards many times. There are thinner products coming into the market to help with close-eaves and -verge details and where internal doors are tight up against the external wall.

Solid floors have to be replaced in order to add insulation.

Having dramatically reduced the loss of heat through the building fabric, draughts will account for 90% of the remaining heat loss, so air-tightness is a must. Aim for 3m³ of air loss per m².h of dwelling at a pressure of 50 P. Have your details like the seal around pipes air-pressure tested until you know they are working. You'll

soon learn which plumbers and electricians are forgetting to seal up the holes they drill in your otherwise air-tight walls!

Even in the UK we can get 50% of our hot water from solar panels on the roof. Low energy lights reduce electricity consumption by 80% and eco-labelled domestic appliances can reduce their power consumption by 50%.

Unfortunately, we can't do anything about the efficiency of home entertainment equipment or electrical devices tenants bring into their homes. We do advise tenants to switch off and not use standby, but the Government and industry need to reduce the power consumption of our televisions and home computers.

Energy savings potential

kWh/year	Typical	Sustainable	£0.06
Heat	12000	1200	£72.00
Hot Water	3350	1675	£100.50
Lights	1200	240	£28.80
Appliances	1500	750	£90.00
Other	800	800	£96.00
	18850	4665	£387.30

* weighted average fuel unit price (mix of gas and electricity today)

Typical UK household fuel bills come to £1300 per annum, so for an achievable investment we can reduce fuel bills by £1000 per year.

We can dramatically reduce the energy needed to heat and power the home and the pollution emitted. But we still need 4665 kWh of energy per year in the above example, one quarter of the current amount.

To get to zero carbon you have to generate nearly 5000 kWh of carbon free heat or electricity and that is on top of the 1675 kWh per year we have just generated to halve the use of fuel for hot water by putting 4m² for the solar water heating panels on a south facing roof slope. If we cover the remainder of the south slope with photovoltaic panels, say 10m², we can generate about 4500 kWh per year.

At night the PV's generate nothing, so PV's alone don't get us to zero carbon. In fact as housing providers, we can't get to zero carbon on our own. Some of the shortfall will be met by nuclear power, some from wind, tide and other solar power systems. Some may come from energy-from-waste plants and yet more from fuel crops. Beware the latter. You could be choosing to eat or heat!

How much to budget?

We budget £50,000 for the typical sustainable refurbishment. Can we afford to do all of it? No. Can any of us afford not to do it? No. So the prize goes to whoever comes up with the new way to fund this work. But that's another article.

Richard Baines, Black Country HA



Rethinking construction

Weighing up the benefits and pitfalls of partnering



More than 10 years ago 'Rethinking Construction' was a report prepared by a taskforce led by Sir John Egan. It was commissioned to assess the efficiency of the UK construction industry. The report, whilst acknowledging that some parts were 'World Class', concluded that most of the industry was failing to perform satisfactorily, particularly in terms of cost, quality and time.

The objective was to achieve radical improvements in the design, quality, customer satisfaction and sustainability of UK construction.

Paul Reader was involved in the original promotion of the report in the housing sector as part of the Housing Forum.



Partnering was one of the key outcomes from this report and he acknowledges that whilst it was an excellent concept it has not always worked. In his view where partnering has failed, the problems have often started during the procurement process through either selecting the wrong partner to fulfil the contract objectives or by using a cost model that neither party understands and is often impractical to use. Clients and the consultants they appoint need to accept that successful partnering is as much their responsibility as the contractor's.

Looking at many partnering approaches in the last 10 years and the various methods clients and consultants use to select partners, some processes actually add value and produce the right result. Resident involvement in the selection process is crucial but they must be fully briefed and have a meaningful role, whilst quality method statement questions need to be more bespoke to the actual project.

Rethinking Construction report has had a positive effect on the industry and partnering can produce benefits. But partnering is neither a panacea nor the problem: it all depends on how it is used.

The new economic environment may force the industry back 10 years to 'lowest price wins' and when the going gets tough it's easy to revert to a blame culture. Perhaps now is the time to stop getting hung up on terms such as partnering and open book and for clients and contractors to work together using a common sense approach to deliver high quality maintenance services.

Chris George, whilst working at Gosport Borough Council was involved in an early demonstration project that compared planned maintenance works delivered through traditional and partnering approaches.



Comparing what was done in Gosport nearly 10 years ago to current day experiences, there has been mixed success over the last ten years.

Areas such as resident involvement, forms of contracts, IT systems, the use of local labour and training programmes have been improved over that timescale, as has the overall way in which clients and contractors work together.

But have there been any improvements in areas such as procuring our contractors, the involvement of the supply chain, and the use and understanding of key performance indicators? Given previous experiences, these do not seem to have moved on as they might.

And no real progress has been made in areas such as open book payment, contractor's flexibility and willingness to do things differently - indeed the original rethinking construction report clearly highlighted that improvements would come not from doing what we already do better, but from doing it completely differently.

Both Paul and Chris agree that life is better with the report than it would have been without it.

But for Chris, the partnering approach is more of an ethos or a philosophy, which should create a better environment for two organisations to more effectively work together.

Paul Reader, EPS

Chris George, Mendip Housing



A member of the Aster



NHMF Awards summary

The inaugural NHMF awards attracted a number of excellent entries. You can read the full details of these projects, and all the shortlisted applications on the website: www.nhmf.co.uk/awards

Best practice in maintenance awards



- 1 Client best at meeting residents' needs
- 2 Most innovative DLO
- 3 Best managed external contract
- 4 Best use of technology
- 5 Best improving neighbourhood initiative

Initial applications deadline:
25th November 2009

Awards will be presented at
NHMF conference, 26th January 2010

For further details www.nhmf.co.uk

Contractor providing innovative maintenance winner The Wrekin Housing Trust

Over recent years we have seen the coming of age of a number of vital technologies that, if orchestrated competently, offer a very real opportunity for significant business efficiency gains in the repairs service. The flip side is a similar opportunity to crash and burn big style if you get it wrong. The biggest risks being a failure to appreciate the specialist skills, knowledge, and expertise required to make it all happen, underestimating the cultural backlash and the grit and determination needed to face this off. The technologies I refer to are a mobile repairs system for your operatives, a real-time work scheduling solution, and an electronic trading solution with automated van stock management to ensure the right materials are on the right vans at the right times.

In house programming can avoid the frustration that the software provider has a greater level of influence over the success of your project than you do. There are very real shark infested waters out there, not least in the plethora of mobile repairs solutions on the market.



Wrekin Housing Trust's modernisation involved forging close working partnerships with Travis Perkins for a supply chain solution and with Xbrace for their 'Opti-Time' scheduling system. They developed their own Hand-e-Work mobile repairs and Hand-e-Biz electronic trading software solutions and sell their software and expertise to the sector with a number of successful contracts delivered.

Lawrence Gardner, The Wrekin Housing Trust

The Wrekin
Housing Trust

Client meeting resident needs winner Housing Solutions Group



Our new repairs service was put together in partnership with our residents, and is designed specifically to meet their needs and aspirations. The new service has been described as "an innovative responsive repairs service" by the Audit Commission.

- There were four specific things that our customers wanted:
- A quicker response time for emergency repairs. Customers were not happy with the 24 hour target time
 - First time completion
 - They wanted to say when a repair was completed to their satisfaction
 - Appointments made and kept

The Project Team came up with the following proposals

- Introduction of a 4 hour response time for emergency repairs
- Removal of the old urgent repairs category and the introduction of a 21 day completion target for all non-emergency repairs – a 10 day reduction in routine repair completion times
- Introduction of evening and Saturday morning appointment slots
- An electronic customer sign-off on PDAs to empower the customer to decide when the repair is finished
- Jobs would stay open after an emergency 'make safe' so the customer had only one job number per fault
- If a member of our repairs team could not fix the fault on the first visit they would immediately book a convenient follow-up appointment

We have broken away from the housing industry norm, making benchmarking more difficult. The future development of our repairs service will be shaped by our customers.

John Barnes, Housing Solutions

housing
solutions group

Resident involvement in maintenance winner Bournville Village Trust

To establish truly tenant centred services the maintenance department formed a consultative panel with 10 tenant volunteers. Over time, a flourishing, experienced tenant panel would evolve, setting its own agenda and having significant input into all major decisions affecting the delivery of the maintenance service

Four specific goals for the panel were agreed at the start:

- To provide the right information for tenants prior to experiencing maintenance works
- To offer an adequate range of options & choices in maintenance works
- To achieve significant input into the selection of external contractors
- To review and have input to maintenance policies & procedures

Officers on the panel began training the tenants on technical issues and operational constraints. Officers organised for tenant panel members to spend time with key staff at our maintenance depot, providing the opportunity of experiencing first hand the reality of front line service delivery.

After training, the panel had a critical role in appointing electrical contractors and kitchen suppliers. They organised a maintenance exhibition of components for refurbishments, offering choices and information about the work.

In 2008 the tenant panel helped produce a BVT Maintenance DVD. Intended for tenants imminently due major maintenance works, whilst remaining resident in their home, it covers all aspects of planned and cyclical maintenance. From editing the script, allowing their homes to be turned into film studios and even taking on starring roles, the DVD simply would not have come to fruition without the support of our motivated and knowledgeable panel.

Most significantly, two tenant panel members were permanently appointed onto our Housing Services Committee. This Committee is responsible direct to the Board of Trustees for all the housing-related strategies and policies across the whole of BVT; it comprises Trustees and resident representatives, and is one of the most influential committees of the Trust. Achieving this goal has shown us all how powerful true tenant involvement can be.

Andrew Griffiths, Bournville Village Trust

Bournville
VILLAGE TRUST

Customer care is dead!



Brilliant customer service isn't a question of procedures and training: it requires a positive business culture

How many times have you walked into a shop, council office or Housing Association and immediately known that you were going to receive absolutely terrible service.

- They don't want you there • You are a complete nuisance
- They don't like you • You are a waste of their time and their life!

I am afraid that we all experience this sort of service on a regular basis:

- Being ignored • Rudeness • Made to feel small
- Stupidity • Frustration

You may have heard the person who says, if it wasn't for the customers everything would be great!

Hang on a second, no customer means no business doesn't it?

Forget all those boring customer care courses – if you can create a brilliant place to work, with a shared purpose and direction you can achieve amazing things.

If you are going to deliver fantastic customer service you need to go right to the soul of the organisation, the culture of the organisation, the way you do things around here!

Create a vibrant, energetic culture where people take a pride in their work and in their company.

Happy focussed people = happy customers

Happy motivated people, who understand why they are there and what the business is trying to achieve.

My top seven secrets to creating a brilliant business are:

- 1 Ensure you have senior management buy in and everybody supports the change programme

- 2 Create urgency for change – why is there a need to change, do people understand why? Inspire your people to want to deliver fantastic service and take pride in being part of a winning organisation

- 3 Take a base line position now. How are you performing e.g. customer service levels, employee morale, employee turnover

- 4 Involve employees in creating a compelling shared vision, values and direction – how can you persuade your people to deliver four simple things? Here is something that I created for a large maintenance organisation.

- On time • Smart appearance • Tidy job • Great attitude

Four simple statements to provide excellent customer service, a no bull approach!

- 5 Deal with poor performance and negativity

- 6 Stamp your direction and values throughout your business and live them every day.

- 7 Praise and reward great service – spot somebody doing something well and tell them – Monitor performance against your new vision and values, use 360 degree appraisal feedback to ensure people are living the values and delivering fantastic service.

"It is not rocket science" but the amazing thing is that most organisations don't do it, they really don't!

By creating a positive business culture you can gain a competitive advantage over your opposition and deliver amazing customer service.

Liam O'Connell
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