



NHMF best practice awards 2011



Best use
of IT award



What is innovative about the service provided?

Introduction

Worcester Community Housing (WCH) is the largest provider of affordable homes in the City Of Worcester. Our journey as a newly established independent social housing organisation began in April 2004 with the transfer of 4,700 homes from the local council. We're here to deliver local ambitions and harness local resources - private, public and voluntary - to make a difference to local lives and create homes and thriving communities to be proud of.

Customer feedback is central to what we do and our 2009 Customer Status Survey informed us that 73% of our customers considered that Home Repairs and Maintenance was, unsurprisingly, the most important thing we do. With our in-house maintenance team (IHMT) we have continued to deliver faster repairs with high levels of satisfaction however our aspiration to achieve top decile performance was a little way off.

73% of our customers consider Home Repairs and Maintenance is the most important thing we do

To accelerate the speed of service improvement, we decided that a more innovative approach was required to find a way of improving customer satisfaction, of learning from up to date, reliable, customer feedback to improve our services, and to develop best practice along the way.

We knew that to get reliable customer feedback, it was vital that the surveys were unbiased and consistent in delivery – which would best be achieved if the person conducting the survey was independent from WCH and properly trained. This meant using non-WCH staff to conduct the interviews at times that suited our customers. We knew it was important to seek customers' views as soon as a service had been received, and to be able to see the survey analysis quickly in order to respond rapidly to any dissatisfaction. We needed a solution which would let staff see trends in customer satisfaction and vitally, that would not take staff time away from service delivery and improvement. We wanted to avoid the trap of losing steam after gathering customer feedback so that all our energy could go into responding to what the feedback was telling us.

It was important to us that we could see the survey results as soon as possible after the interview was completed so that we could immediately follow up on any situations where the customer was dissatisfied. To make the best use of feedback, we wanted the results to be segmented so that we could analyse according to the contractor that completed the work, the trade and priority as well as by our strands of diversity. We felt that if we could achieve all these goals then we would have a very powerful performance management tool with which to improve our services.

A new solution to measure and monitor customer satisfaction seamlessly

Initially, we thought we might be asking a lot to get a solution with the level of sophistication that we wanted and thought perhaps it would not be possible to fulfil all our requirements with a single solution. Our research identified a new entrant into the customer feedback market called Rated by Residents by Voluntas Housing.



The new solution would measure and monitor customer satisfaction and seamlessly integrate:

- Daily extraction of repair records to enable **automated** sampling of customers
- **Independent** Market Research Society guided telephone interviewers
- Immediate web-based reporting of results for **continuous** monitoring and action
- Capture of verbatim customer feedback for follow-up and **analysis**

The Voluntas Housing solution had all the aspects we needed including:

- Independence
- Timeliness
- Statistical robustness
- Minimisation of bias
- The ability to report by any segment we chose
- Allows our staff to focus on using the results

We learnt that Rated by Residents had been specifically set up by people who had worked in the Social Housing sector for many years. Despite being a new product, we chose to proceed as we believed that this integrated and customer- based solution represented a huge shift away from the 'traditional' way that landlords gather satisfaction about their repairs and maintenance service.

The 'traditional' methods are contrasted against Rated by Residents below:

Traditional methods	WCH method using Rated by Residents	Impact of using Rated by Residents
Surveys carried out infrequently.	Surveys are carried out close to real time. Voluntas Housing take customer repair details every day from our system so that calls can be made within a maximum of one week of the repair being completed.	<p>Relevance We get more relevant responses as the repair is still fresh in the customer's mind when answering the survey questions.</p> <p>Speed We can act upon feedback quickly as the customers are interviewed very soon after they have received a service and the results are reported straight away onto a secure website where we can check satisfaction levels day by day.</p> <p>Continuous Survey interviews take place continuously so we can spot trends in satisfaction from week to week, month to month.</p>

		Right level of contact We can avoid customer feedback overload by ensuring that customers are not repeatedly contacted; this is something our customers have really appreciated.
Heavy reliance on paper surveys, which can cause biased results due to self-selection of those completing the surveys. For example, older people are more likely to return postal surveys.	Rated by Residents uses Market Research Society (MRS) guided telephone interviews.	Real, honest feedback We get less biased results, which represent our customer base better.
Large amount of staff time and money involved in creating survey forms, administering their completion, collating and analysing results, creating reports.	Rated by Residents does all the sampling, interviewing, collation and report creation for us.	Better value for money We get better value for money. We only pay for completed surveys and, as our staff time in gathering and analysing data is minimised, we can focus on responding to what our customers said to improve services.
Results may not be representative of the customer base as they depend on who returned survey forms e.g. they may not cover all of our contractors.	Rated by Residents can stratify our sample to ensure we have representative surveys.	Statistically, reliable results The results are representative of our customers because the system automatically extracts pre-calculated samples from our database.
Due to the time lag between repairs and survey results being available, as well as the inability to drill down into individual surveys, the traditional surveying method provides a general 'flavour' of levels of satisfaction rather than specific, actionable feedback.	We have instant results, which we can filter. The filters identify changes in satisfaction levels by the customers' age, gender, ethnicity, religion, disability, contractor, trade, repair priority and whether the customer considers the repair to be completed.	Analysis of service We can spot which parts of the service are not performing well and those that require attentions e.g. whether one contractor or trade has higher satisfaction than another. We can identify any pockets of dissatisfaction and improve how we meet our diverse customers' specific needs by seeing if certain groups are more or less satisfied than others.
Surveys carried out by landlord or contractor's own staff.	Independent market research team undertake the interviews.	Honesty, good use of time Our customers can feel confident in giving their honest views as they are interviewed by telephone by independent

		<p>MRS-guided researchers rather than our own staff.</p> <p>Our staff time is spent on responding to the feedback rather than gathering it.</p>
Results tend to focus on the numbers e.g. what percentage is satisfied rather than what could be done to improve the repairs service.	Rated by Residents gathers verbatim comments from our customers about our repairs and improvements services.	<p>Accurate customer comments</p> <p>We can see comments that our customers made about our services, not just statistics. We find these invaluable as we can respond to what the customer really thinks straight away.</p>

Voluntas Housing has been very keen to develop their solution with us. We implemented Rated by Residents and then had ongoing dialogue with Voluntas about ways that the solution could be amended as we gathered results and started using the analysis. For example, we soon saw the benefit of using Rated by Residents to gather feedback for our 'local offers' and so Voluntas completed interviews for us specifically for this purpose.

A powerful tool to help deliver excellent service

We now feel we have an extremely powerful tool to diagnose customer concerns and satisfaction which complements our other management information systems in helping to deliver excellent services to all our customers.

As this was a leap of faith for WCH, we have been extremely proactive in ensuring our investment in innovation had specific success measures and were measured by our Customer Experience Manager:

- **Improving responsiveness:** surveys can now take place within days of service delivery and are reported and viewable straight away by our staff. We have the ability to see 'what happened yesterday', identify problems in service delivery and take the appropriate action with the contractor or customer in a very timely way.
- **Independence and professionalism of survey:** the methodology we have chosen uses Market Research Society- accredited researchers who are independent of WCH. This means that we know the interviews are being conducted in a professional, sensitive and respectful way and that they give us the facts.
- **Achieving statistical robustness:** we needed to ensure that our conclusions could be backed up by sound statistics. Samples are now taken automatically to be representative of our customer mix with statistically significant sample sizes that allow us to compare the performance of our different contractors on an equal footing.
- **User-friendliness:** we needed the web-based results to be both simple to use yet sufficiently detailed to allow progressive analysis, whether by geography, diversity, trade or contractor. We needed to be able to drill right down into the detail by any segment we choose for any element of the survey so that we can make sure that we are providing a good service to all our customer types.
- **Maximum impact on WCH staff time:** a critical measure of success was that the system we chose needed to release staff time from collection and analysis onto the higher-value tasks of problem resolution and service improvement.

What are the benefits?

WCH's mission is to provide excellent services, which are customer driven and efficient. The Rated by Residents solution enables us to manage our performance to achieve these outcomes and by being independent, continuous and critically, customer-informed, we are able to oversee and improve:

- Speed
- Customer service
- Effectiveness
- Equalities

Seven Service Questions

Voluntas Housing's market research team ask our customers seven service questions and the results are entered directly into the solution. During this first year we have concentrated on First visit completions; Operative attitude; Cleanliness; Repair quality; service equality; and overall satisfaction. Importantly, the results are from the customer's point of view as their judgement on what we do is the most important to us; systems can often mislead us to believe things are complete or good but are not always from the consumers' perspective.

The independent results for the first seven months of 2010/11 are:

Question	Cumulative results to October 2010
When reporting the repair, how satisfied were you with the helpfulness of the staff?	92.7%
Was the repair carried out in one visit?	72.4%
How satisfied were you with the attitude of the worker?	94.5%
How satisfied are you that your property was left clean and tidy?	94.7%
How satisfied were you with the quality of repair?	94.9%
Generally, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the way your housing association deals with repairs and maintenance?	89.3%
Throughout the repairs process, do you feel that you were treated fairly by Worcester Community Housing?	94.3%

Judging performance daily

Whilst cumulative report is a key requirement, the fact that Rated by Residents is automatically updated every week with customer feedback means we can judge performance on a daily basis and more critically, we can view feedback by various filters e.g. strand of diversity, contractor or priority to ascertain what may be driving good performance or areas of dissatisfaction.



To embed the solution in our day to day working arrangements, we have taken steps to train all key staff members and managers on using Rated by Residents, enabling them to review customer feedback KPIs and verbatim feedback.

More equality and diversity data

Our equality and diversity data is being enhanced as it is collected as part of the survey (if we haven't already got it) and made available to us in the form of filters in Rated by Residents. The Rated by Residents system includes an export tool which enables us to export the equality and diversity data collected during the surveys so that we can update our core systems with these data and therefore removes the need to ask our tenants equality and diversity questions as part of future interviews.

Using Rated by Residents has greatly improved our ability to ensure our diverse customers are equally satisfied with our services and their outcomes. For example:

- We can check that the intended representative sampling is in fact happening by interrogating the Rated by Residents system.
- We can filter our results to see how service delivery is perceived across the different customer segments to make sure that we are catering for all our customers' needs.
- This "drilling down" into the detail goes all the way through the results. For example, we can examine satisfaction scores, trends and feedback for one particular equality and diversity strand – in one geographic area, receiving service provision from one stated contractor, over any particular timescale. All permutations and combinations are possible so if we want to view data for BME customers across the whole service then we can do so as well as being able to highlight which aspects of the service are not working for our BME customers. We can even see this level of detail for each individual question on our survey which has been specifically constructed for WCH and our local needs.

9% increase in customer satisfaction

In terms of overall satisfaction with the responsive repairs service, the level of very satisfied customers has increased by 9% since we have been using Rated by Residents. Whilst we have made impressive gains we now have a tool that will enable us to scrutinise our service delivery in more detail so that we can continue to improve services for our customers.

The collection of customer comments alongside the scores allows us to see the context so that when we are required to follow-up with a customer we are doing so from a position of knowledge. We recognise that when a customer makes the effort to give us their comments we should return the courtesy by acting upon them swiftly and this approach enables us to do that.

We are currently in the process of extending Rated by Residents to all of our repairs and maintenance services, our improvement programme and gas servicing/maintenance.

Financial costs and benefits

Pooling expertise in housing, maintenance, market research and software

We wanted to stay close to the implementation and development of the Rated by Residents solution as any form of involvement with our customers must be of high quality and effective. In doing so we have formed an effective partnership with Voluntas, pooling expertise in housing, maintenance, market research, and software to deliver even better repairs and maintenance services to our customers.

The costs involved in adopting this new approach were mainly staff time. Our Customer Experience Manager led this work which mainly comprised of meetings and telephone calls with Voluntas to explore what we wanted to achieve from the solution and understand our specific requirements regarding the surveys and how we would use the results. This was time that we would usually spend dealing with surveys anyway so wasn't an additional cost.

The initial time invested in setting up the new system has resulted in us saving staff time on undertaking the surveys and analysing the results. For example, where we ask for customer comments we get a lot of free text that has to be analysed. Rated by Residents uses a system called 'Word clouds' (below) which graphically shows us which words customers have used most in their comments i.e. the more frequent the word is used the larger it appears.



The word cloud instantly picks out what matters most to our customers...repairs, security, safety, the area they live in, behaviour, communications. Analysing the free text from the 586 comments used to create this word cloud to pick out these themes would have taken hours of staff time.

In terms of sharing and learning from best practice we find using Voluntas gives us free access to advice as the Voluntas Directors are often able to give us contact details of other organisations facing similar issues, or share their years of housing experience to suggest how we might respond to our results.

We pay circa £8,000 and get a full range of services from Voluntas Housing to manage and monitor feedback from our customers. They take care of the whole process, our staff can focus on using the feedback to improve services.

External audit

Whilst we get the detailed customer feedback that we want we also get the benefit that, because it is delivered to us independently by a Market Research Accredited organisation, we have the confidence that the results would stand up to external scrutiny.

Changes in the future

The changes to the regulatory and inspection environment means we will have less external scrutiny of our services. At WCH we feel that this makes it even more important to demonstrate that we take service quality and customer satisfaction seriously and we will be seeking ways of developing our use of Rated by Residents to serve our local requirements. This may involve using Voluntas Housing to complete a regular overall satisfaction surveys with customers and developing a way that our customers can see the Rated by Residents results to build in an extra layer of scrutiny.

Transferability to other organisations

Any organisation which provides services to customers could benefit from using this system. We would suggest that interested organisations should be ready to embrace change, be customer focused and genuinely willing to have their current performance challenged. We learnt some invaluable lessons on the way:

- Make sure you know how you will use the answers before you ask the questions
- Look for the “why” as well as the “what” when seeking feedback
- Use customer profile data to highlight pockets of dissatisfaction
- Overlay service information e.g. priority to add intelligence
- Get feedback as close to the repair as possible
- Verbatim comments are invaluable for themes and qualitative trends

Whilst Rated by Residents is currently used exclusively by housing providers it is just as relevant for contractors to monitor and improve their own performance. This could be very beneficial in a tendering process in being able to say that they have an independent basis for measuring customer satisfaction, which will reassure clients.

The solution is commercially available from Voluntas Housing and we understand that it can be implemented in around five weeks. Rated by Residents is entirely hosted by Voluntas Housing so there is a minimum burden on our systems. Other housing providers using the solution include Liverpool Mutual Homes, Leeds Federated Housing, Incommunities Ltd, Plus Dane Group, Arcadia Group, Oaklee Housing Association in Northern Ireland, Festival Housing Group and Peabody Housing Trust in London. We meet with the other users periodically and this has proven to be a useful way of discussing and learning how to improve our repairs services.



Whilst we have created surveys with Voluntas Housing that specifically address our needs, the Rated by Residents solution can be tailored to meet any local circumstances. As such it is easily transferable, for example we used it to conduct our local offer consultation in the summer.

At WCH, we now run three services for customer satisfaction and feedback analysis through Rated by Residents:

- **Responsive Repairs** - we take a representative sample from each of our three contractors so that we can compare them on an equal footing.
- **Improvements Programme** – we are spending £6 million per year on delivering our improvements service and Voluntas contact our customers who have received an improvement.
- **Gas servicing** – as part of our new contract, we have embedded the solution in the performance framework.

The expertise is all provided for us and we have not had to learn any new skills to use the system which means that we can focus on what we are here for, serving our customers.

Voluntas Housing provided all of our relevant staff with training on how to view and interrogate our feedback results. The system is web-based so it's just a case of logging-in and clicking on whichever results we wish to see.

We'd welcome the opportunity to show other landlords how we approach collecting and using customer feedback. For more information, contact:

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