



# Delivering progressive and improving maintenance services



Working Together



What's good for you  
is good for us.

## Question 1

### What is innovative about the service provided?

Many organisations claim to work within a partnering environment but the challenge is often to make sure this commitment is actually embedded throughout every aspect of both organisations. Optima and Axis have worked in a genuine environment of support that has enabled us to develop **a service that is totally bespoke to our customers' needs** and wishes and is constantly improving in every aspect. From day one everyone has worked together to deliver high quality service. Irrespective of whether they are a resident, a member of the Optima team or the Axis team no-one came with any predetermined ideas and therefore everyone has **focused on what is best for the customer and the service**.

Previously, the service received was based on a traditional client / contractor relationship that was largely paper based with no added value, flexibility or proper customer focus. In light of this Optima used modern procurement methods to select Axis as service provider.

As part of the tender brief, the Board of Optima and its Senior Management team set a number of challenges in relation to its development, works and service projects, which were set out in a Partnering Policy Statement. Axis responded by setting out a "menu" of options as part of the tender submission, which Optima could choose from, along with a staged process of implementation until the service became totally bespoke to our customers' needs. Axis staff have also worked with Optima management team to help build and support their 30 year strategy.

*"It is always an uncertain time when an organisation changes the service provider for such a significant area such as responsive repairs. Residents, Optima Staff and Optima's Board have all been very impressed with the service being provided by Axis and recognise that selecting Axis was the right choice."*

*Ian Stokes, Optima Community HA*

The effectiveness of the new approach has been monitored and demonstrated through the Core Group, the Quality Repairs Group, Key Performance Indicators, resident engagement, real time surveys and external benchmarking through Housemark.

### Customers Shape the Service

**A Quality Repairs Group was established** comprising of members from Optima, Axis and a regular group of residents, who undertook **a complete review of the service and worked together to implement a number of innovations and enhancements** we could apply, both large and small, which ultimately shaped the service. As part of this process, we **offered training to residents** that gave them a thorough understanding of the level of service currently provided and our responsibilities. As a result of this we have been able to **develop service enhancements that genuinely meet with the requests and needs of our own residents**. For example, we offered the residents weekend appointments but they felt that it was more important to them to have access to evening appointments. As a result of this Axis offers weekend appointments on request but also has regular evening appointment slots available every Tuesday and Thursday. The same group reviews the standard to which vacant properties are repaired. Through visits to a number of empty properties and by gaining an understanding of the condition in which properties become vacant the resident representatives have been able to identify the repairs they feel incoming residents would want to have carried out before they move in. This has proved to be very successful and has resulted in Optima modifying the lettable standard

### Intelligent Use of IT

Previously the service was operated on a mainly paper based system with minimal IT support. **Axis and Optima's systems were interfaced** so both parties have **full visibility of the repairs service**. The introduction of an **operative hand held computer system** meant that a number of stages could be removed from the whole repairs process, **improving efficiency and enabling Optima to accurately measure the rate of fix on the first visit**. The move to an IT based transparent and portable system has been achieved whilst maintaining high levels of service delivery.



Key Performance Indicators are reported directly from the IT system providing transparency which has built confidence and trust. The KPIs that have been developed suit a range of internal and external requirements and include organisational performance, team performance, resident satisfaction and CSR activity. **Reporting has been improved** and reports are available to suit a variety of requests for both internal and external reporting requirements.

*As a result of weekly planning meetings during the whole of May and June everything was in place to deliver the service from day one. It was a real achievement to have both organisations IT systems linked from the start of the contract.*

### Working together

Optima made office space available to Axis who moved their Regional Director and an entire team, allowing **both teams to share office space and create efficiencies in overheads**.

The contract included a TUPE transfer and Optima were keen that Axis retained the existing team. This has been achieved through a caring and **successful staff transfer process** with the majority of transferring staff staying on.

The partnership enjoys a very **active core team** and Axis has actively participated and delivered presentations to other Core Group members on Equality and Diversity, Information Technology, Training and Sustainability. Axis and Optima staff share shadowing and coaching.

Axis has **employed a Resident Liaison Officer from within the estate** who has unique knowledge of the progress of the development of the estate. Because of this, she has a genuine understanding of both residents and contractor needs and so is very well placed to be the main communication link for residents. Formalised procedures are in place for customer care and the RLO has passed NVQ2 in customer care and is studying for qualifications with the Chartered Institute of Customer Care.



### Value for Money

In line with government and Audit Commission guidance demonstrable ***value for money is being achieved through a more efficient service*** and improved service delivery through the refurbishment of office space provided by Optima, Axis' investment in IT and additional support staff and reduction in costs. ***Axis' Supply Chain Manager has worked with Optima to locate alternative cheaper materials with greater performance benefits.*** An example of this is a change in the specification of extractor fans to a better product. The ***repairs service has been extended to evenings and weekends, texting ahead to confirm appointments and follow up calls to survey customer satisfaction*** have all been introduced, which has ***increased customer satisfaction whilst reducing the cost of the repairs service.***

### Improved Voids Processes

The Quality Repairs Group has focused on the standard of void repairs along with the processes we use. Axis surveys, photographs and specifies void repairs.

Void turnaround has reduced significantly with the key to key time for voids needing major refurbishments being just 15 days and the key to key time for standard voids being seven days.

## Question 2

What are the benefits to:

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

*How does it enable the client and the contractor to provide a better or more efficient service?*

Greater efficiency and effectiveness in communications systems is allowing Optima to provide a far better service. The system offers transparency and **greater budget and asset management**. The introduction of the improved IT systems now means that **appointments are made at the first point of call** and the **level of repairs completed at the first visit has increased**.

*The rate of fix on first visit has improved from an average of 70% to 99%*

This, along with more convenient appointments has resulted in greater levels of customer satisfaction. In turn this means that Optima receives fewer telephone calls to chase up repairs and fewer complaints. The local appointment of the Resident Liaison Officer means that she has a thorough understanding from both the perspective of being a resident as well as the contractor which means she is well placed to explain issues to other residents as well as suggest improvements to the rest of her team.

From Axis perspective, Optima is an excellent client to work with. The level of information provided about Optima as an organisation at tender stage allowed Axis to identify their key drivers and therefore to understand that the service would need to be a **bespoke service developed in partnership with Optima and residents**. This joint commitment to achieving the key objectives means that Axis enjoys a good working relationship with optima evidenced by outstanding achievement against key performance indicators and a happy and rewarded team.

*What improvements are experienced by residents?*

Residents enjoy a truly customer focused service that, through their involvement in the Quality Repairs Group, is developed and delivered according to the specific needs of the Optima customer base. Residents can access evening and weekend appointments and experience a level of **100% right first time repairs** that are most likely to be completed on the first visit. This has resulted in an **increase in satisfaction to an average of 94%**.

Axis made and kept 100% of appointment for residents of Optima Community Association on a Responsive Repairs & Maintenance contract.  
(KPI measured by Optima Community Association: August 2008 – February 2009)

### *What wider community benefits does it provide?*

Optima is a community based organisation set up to address specific issues within the community who were dissatisfied with their previous landlord. Axis has fitted in with Optima's **community focused approach** and is genuinely committed to positively contributing to the wider community.

We have developed a number of community based activities and events. Examples include: **Assistance to the local Scout Group** in the procurement of a local contractor to build a new hut. Later in the process it is envisaged that Axis will fit a kitchen or decorate walls in terms of a more tangible degree of support.

**A joint entry to the Race for Life.** In June, women from both organisations took part in the Race for Life.

**Macmillan Coffee Morning** Run by Optima staff with Axis donating staff time and prizes.

**Support for 'Baby Jack'** through sponsorship and donation collection for a local disabled toddler who walked from Optima's offices to his Nan's flat in Chiswick House.

Axis and Optima staff have donated their lunch times in support of events at the community centre for older persons, which have included: **Fish and Chip Fridays, Play Your Cards Right, Quizzes and a History Project.**

**Optima's Love Your Park** event was attended by a number of Axis and Optima staff who helped to plant bulbs, paint gates and pick up litter



*“ Axis has been able to provide training opportunities for two apprentices, they have employed a local resident as a resident liaison officer, they have offered enhancements to the appointment system and they have supported several community events.”*

*Ian Stokes, Optima Community HA*

### *Does it also contribute to meeting the government's efficiency targets and/or sustainability targets?*

**Optima has been able to meet the Governments' agenda for value for money.** Previous repair costs placed Optima in the lower quartile but modern methods of contractor selection, and **more efficient, better quality services and reducing costs** now places Optima in the upper quartile.

The average repair cost has reduced by 23%.



### Question 3

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

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

Although there have been a number of cash and non cash benefits, there has been very little cost in monetary terms for these improvements. The partnership has invested £40,000 in IT implementation and £10,000 was spent by Axis on fitting out the office provided by Optima. The main investment has been through the effort required to blend the service to totally suit the needs of residents, to try a different approach, analyse the outcome and check for trends and results before fully implementing the change.

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

The average **cost of repairs per property has reduced by 23%** whilst at the same time, greater efficiency and improvements in service delivery and customer focus have been achieved.

As an example of greater efficiency and removal of duplication, Axis has adopted the surveying function on the voids, which has meant that this basic overhead percentage can be redirected to other areas such as energy efficiency. The integrated IT system includes an appointment scheduler with integrated asset management systems and unlimited reporting capabilities for both the client and the contractor.

##### *How do you measure the financial benefits?*

Optima uses Business Objects to produce reports that are based on average job cost, average job cost by category, verification of jobs completed on time, variations against budgets, which are all mapped against previous costs to measure the financial benefits of the new approach.

##### *Is there any independent audit of these benefits?*

The whole service is audited externally by both Axis and Optima's auditors. **Optima is a member of Housemark** who independently benchmark our services against similar housing organisations and **Axis has an in house Performance Management Team** who benchmark between contracts with different clients.

##### *How are these benefits shared between the parties?*

As the service has evolved, Axis has benefitted by procuring further work from Optima. Optima has benefitted from the real savings and both parties from improved efficiency and better levels of service delivery.

##### *How do you expect these to change in the future?*

We are currently looking at a move to an **open book approach** and possibly target price, further **removing duplication and improving efficiency**.

## Question 4

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

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

The type of organisation that can benefit from similar approach includes small RSLs like Optima who are totally **open to the concept of partnering**, but who may have considered these levels of commitment, investment and service provision only possible on larger contracts.

*“ Axis is a company that has a real wow factor, understands the social housing business and is committed to delivering a three star service for all of its clients. I am truly amazed that we have been able to develop such a real spirit of partnering between residents, Optima and Axis in only eight months.*

*Ian Stokes, Optima Community HA*

Likewise, contractors like Axis benefit from a client who is committed to working within a no blame culture with the **emphasis on working together to deliver excellent services**. Both organisations benefit from the ability to streamline services so that they are more efficient and deliver better value for money.

*“ Optima never approach us in a negative manner. They have never written to us, other than to award the contract. They are totally flexible. We are part of the Optima family, have free access to their offices and are as much a part of the repairs team as their in house team. It is all about the delivery of the service and the resident. We are an integrated team in the true sense of partnering.*

*Julie Steventon, Director, Axis*

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

Optima was established to deal with a specific set of issues and customer concerns and so was very much a customer focused organisation from day one. This focus on the resident needs to be embedded at all levels of the organisation and a willingness to adopt a joint approach to problems is essential. Axis is a family owned company with clear ideas on how they should conduct themselves who **pay attention to the little details** that make the service offering great. **Optima and Axis share the conviction to customer focus and high values** and this has been instrumental in achieving our goals. These circumstances are not unique in isolation but have created the ideal combination.



*What expertise is needed to make it a success?*

An appropriate level of resource is needed to achieve the level of improvement and joint working that we enjoy. This includes strong leadership and committed, motivated team with a level of competency on both sides and the conviction to make things work. Many organisations make the mistake of thinking that partnering is about being easy on each other, which often results in issues not being addressed head on until one or other party reverts to type. In reality, **addressing issues and making real improvements** involves a high level of effort on both sides and can sometimes mean that uncomfortable conversations have to take place. So the people involved will need the appropriate desire and mindset to make things happen. A strong track record, consistent leadership and people who want to continually **learn and look for continuous improvement** and a joined up approach are the prerequisites in making this example work.

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

The only training was given to the residents to ensure they fully understood the level of service we were providing at the time so that they could identify the improvements they wanted to see and therefore make a valuable contribution to the development of the service going forward. The best training would be to gather ideas by visiting as many organisations as possible who can demonstrate good practise.

*How might you do it differently if you started over again at another organisation? Where can they go for assistance or more information?*

This has required a great deal of effort and dedication from the whole team, and a lot had to be learnt in progress. Despite this, there is no strong feeling to anything particularly differently as the hard work as reaped such great results. If there were any advice we would offer to other organisations it would be to visit as many other organisations as possible. A great deal of time and effort can be spent seeking the right kind of contractor, but it is important to be the right kind of client too. We would recommend visiting as many organisations who demonstrate good practice as possible, to understand their approach as well as that of their contractors.