
Housing Solutions

entry for

National Housing Maintenance Forum

Best Practice Awards 2009

Category - the organisation that was best at meeting residents'
needs in the provision of a maintenance service



Housing Solutions

Housing Solutions is a not-for-profit company dedicated to providing affordable homes and high quality services tailored to meet the needs of its customers. We offer affordable homes to rent, shared ownership schemes, homes for older people and specialist accommodation for people who need support and care to live within the community.

Customer Service Strategy

Putting customers first has been our watchword ever since we were established in 1995. It's a fundamental part of what we are, and we remain focused on improving the lives of our customers in everything we do.

We never forget that most of our customers don't have a choice when they come to us.

So a key factor in our customer service strategy is giving them back some element of choice, and a means of influencing their circumstances.

First and foremost, we listen to what they have to say. We act on the feedback we receive. And we give customers lots of opportunities to get involved in our work, and to help shape the homes and services we provide.

Address - Crown House, Crown Square,
Waldeck Road, Maidenhead,
Berkshire, SL6 8BY

Contact - John Barnes 01628 543118
email - jbarnes@mdha.co.uk
www.housingsolutions.co.uk

What is innovative about the service provided?

Responding to our customers

In response to our customers' needs we have radically overhauled our Responsive Repairs Service over the last 18 months. Our new Repairs Service was put together in partnership with our residents, and is designed to specifically meet their needs and aspirations. The changes have meant that we have broken away from the housing industry norm for responsive repairs, so that we could deliver a customer-led service.

The new service is delivering higher levels of customer satisfaction, more repairs completed on the first visit and it has already been described as:

'an innovative responsive repairs service'

by the Audit Commission.

What have we done?

Feedback from our Residents' Association and two service forums attended by nearly forty residents made it clear that our customers wanted to see changes in our maintenance service. There were four specific things that they wanted:

- A quicker response time for emergency repairs. Our customers told us that the most important factor when they are faced with any emergency repair, is knowing that someone will be with them quickly to deal

with the problem. Customers told us that they were not happy with the 24 hour target time.

- First time completion. Our customers made it clear that completion of a repair on the first visit by our trades team was of major importance to them. However, they also made it clear they wanted us to report on their definition of complete first time and not the one we were using. This would mean that emergency jobs could no longer be closed down when a 'make safe' had been completed, but remained live until the repair was completed.
- They wanted to say when a repair was completed to their satisfaction.
- Appointments made and kept. Our customers told us that giving them a convenient appointment and getting there when we said we would, was a key priority.

A Project Team of staff and residents set about trying to incorporate these customer priorities in to a deliverable responsive repairs service.

The brief was clear the service should still deliver value for money, whilst meeting these changing customer demands. As well as the feedback we already had from customers, the team analysed repair complaints to establish opportunities for learning from these.

What is innovative about the service provided?

Delivering a customer-led service

The Project Team came up with the following proposals for a responsive repairs service that would meet our customers' needs:

- 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. This would result in 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. This would be provided in real time to allow us to follow up on repairs where the customer would not sign off immediately.
- Jobs would stay open even after an emergency 'make safe' to ensure that the customer had only one job number per fault. This would also ensure that our reporting on the percentage of jobs complete on first visit would be in line with customer expectations.

- If a member of our repairs team could not fix the fault on the first visit they would not leave the property without booking a convenient follow-up appointment with the customer (excluding emergency call out).

The changes would be the most significant ever made to our repair service, so all our residents were invited to vote for, or against the changes. Not surprisingly they voted in favour and the new priorities were introduced in April 2008.

The changes have meant that we have broken away from the housing industry norm for responsive repairs. A brave move which presented us with a challenge of how to benchmark our services against other associations. However, the changes have given our customers the service that they wanted.

The future development of our repairs service will be shaped by our customers. In January 2009, we will be holding our first Asset Management Service Forum since the introduction of the changes. Customer feedback from this and from surveys and complaints and compliments will play a vital role in shaping what we do in the future.

What is innovative about the service provided?

Delivering the changes

Meeting our customers request for a faster repairs service presented us with a significant operational challenge – how to deliver the improved service whilst maintaining value for money. We took action on a number of fronts to achieve this. This included:

New Pay Structure

We introduced a new pay structure for our maintenance team. This moved from being 100% based on productivity to a salary with 15% based on performance to help us achieve what our customers wanted. The 15% bonus is made up of a 5% bonus for completing repairs on their first visit to a home, a 5% bonus for achieving customer satisfaction and 5% for productivity. This system was a significant operational change but necessary to support the new priority structure and our focus on customer service.

Reducing repairs through a planned approach

The Home MOT

We faced the challenge of how to deal with a minority of our customers who were making very heavy use of our repairs service. On average, people use the repair service four times a year. But these customers were using it up to 40 times – ten times the average. To try to reduce the number of times these customers called on the repairs service, we introduced a Home MOT scheme. The idea was to enable us to provide a more cost effective and quicker repairs service for all our customers.

Customers who signed up to this scheme received a visit from our maintenance team. They checked the condition of properties and carried out any necessary repairs. If, during the following 12 months, the customer did not use the routine repair service, then we would credit their rent account with £100. We have seen a reduction in repairs of more than 40 per cent at these properties.

Supported Housing Handyman Service

We have introduced a more efficient process for dealing with responsive repair requests from our supported housing stock. These were originally dealt with as the repair requests were made. With our supported housing stock spread across 43 sites this often meant multiple visits to sites to deal with minor problems.

We have introduced a new Handyman Service for these sites. A member of our maintenance team now visits every site on a monthly basis to deal with all routine repairs on a scheduled basis. Repairs are reported through our Customer Contact Centre and our customers know from the schedule when routine repairs will be done. Our multi skilled staff provide this service and are able to carry out a range of repairs including plumbing, carpentry and minor electrical works. Early indications are that we will achieve a 45 per cent reduction in individual visits this year, in comparison to the previous year. As a result our staff are spending less time travelling to and from these sites, giving them more time to spend maintaining our stock in good condition.

What are the benefits to our customers?

Our new responsive repairs service was introduced less than nine months ago. Already we are seeing increases in customer satisfaction, a more efficient repair service with repairs completed more quickly and no increases in our costs.

So what have the results been?

- A 2% increase in overall customer satisfaction with the repairs service. At the end of October 2008 this was 93.5%.
- Over 93% of jobs completed on first visit at October 2008. An increase in 5% despite the change of definition that made first time completion more difficult to achieve after made-safe emergencies were not counted as complete.
- An overall reduction of one day in average time to complete repairs in 2008/09 when compared to 2007/08. Again this is more impressive when you consider we have changed the definition of complete and this is now harder to achieve. Over the past four years average time to complete repairs has reduced from 13 days to its current level of 6.1 days.
- Levels of appointments made and kept at 97.9%.
- Customers are being offered an appointment that is most convenient to

them and not one that fits within prescribed performance targets.

- The responsive repairs expenditure at the end of October 2008 was in line with the expenditure at the same time last year.

The Audit Commission's view

We were inspected by the Audit Commission in July 2008 and in their report they describe the new service as:

“an innovative responsive repairs service driven by customer feedback”

The Commission's report says:

“Housing Solutions is providing a service that is effectively shaped around customer need. Residents we spoke to were positive about the customer focus of trades and repairs staff and the prompt service they receive.

“This is reducing inconvenience to tenants and improving efficiency for the Association. The strategic approach to stock investment and asset management is strong. Repairs and most minor adaptations are carried out quickly and in a highly customer-focused way.”

What were the financial costs and cashable benefits?

From the outset we knew that these changes would bring some challenges. The new system was breaking away from the industry norm and as such it was a risk. It presented challenges in terms of benchmarking given that the system was not widely being used.

No cost increases

We agreed with our customers that the new system could not be implemented if it resulted in an increase in costs.

So we took the following steps to control our expenditure on responsive repairs:

- Increased planned maintenance expenditure on the causes of emergency repairs. Primarily this was on boiler replacements, where analysis of expenditure and call out history on particular products was carried out.
- The removal of the urgent repairs category and introduction of targets that no more than 18% of day to day repairs should be in the emergency category.
- The introduction of the Home MOT and Care Home Handyman services to work on reducing usage of the repairs service, amongst the highest users of the service.
- Reorganisation of the trades' pay structure to put additional focus on what is important to customers (first time completion, customer sign off, out of hours appointments) could be delivered for the same input.
- Introduction of appointment text messaging which, along with other initiatives, has reduced missed appointments by more than 40% over the last two years.

What lessons might be learned by other organisations?

This has been an exercise in involving, listening and responding to our customers.

Any company that wants to deliver customer-driven services could benefit from this approach.

However, for it to be successful we had to have a totally open mind regarding what is important to our customers. This meant moving away from the industry norm and key performance indicators, which our customers told us, were not what they wanted.

We also had to be prepared to make changes in the way we worked, so that we could

deliver a customer-led service, without increasing our costs.

Finally, we have to remain open to our customers changing needs.

What happens next?

We have invited our customers to a Service Forum in January 2009 and will be asking them for feedback on the new service. To be a truly customer led organisation we will have to be prepared to listen and respond, once again, to what they say.

“The changes have given residents the responsive repairs service they wanted. These changes show that if residents work with the Association they can have a strong say in the services they receive. We are particularly delighted that the involvement of the Residents' Association has brought about another major improvement for the Association's residents.”

Rachel Bonner, Chair of Housing Solutions Residents' Association