

A photograph of a modern, multi-story building at dusk. The building features a prominent curved glass section on the left side, which is brightly lit from within. The rest of the building has a mix of brick and light-colored panels, with many windows also illuminated. The sky is dark blue with some clouds. In the foreground, there is a paved road and some grass. The overall scene is well-lit by streetlights and the building's own lights.

# The Wrekin Housing Trust

## Innovation In a Repairs and Maintenance Service

## **Innovation Award Entry – Wrekin Housing Trust – Innovation in Housing Repairs**

### **1 Background**

The Wrekin Housing Trust was established in 1999 following a transfer of homes from Telford & Wrekin Council. The Trust is now one of the largest independent housing providers in the Midlands with over 11,000 homes across the Telford and Newport area. The transfer brought with it the in-house repairs workforce (DLO), who complete over 45,000 response repairs each year.

Following the transfer, the Trust recognised that it needed to upgrade its IT systems and remove the 'Chinese walls' that had been built up between the housing 'client' and the DLO. The Trust also wanted to explore the potential from emerging new technologies to support the corporate vision and modernise the service.

Wrekin recognised that it would be introducing sophisticated office IT systems and mobile telephone technology, but also that the improvement of the repairs operation breaks down when all the information has to be transferred to paper in the form of a work ticket. The introduction of hand-held devices for the trade workforce was driven by the desire to remove the paperwork and the blockages it was creating.

Wrekin first looked at mobile working when purchasing their new Housing IT systems, but felt that the technology being offered at the time wasn't suited to a repairs workforce or the way they wanted to work.

### **Wrekin therefore decided to develop their own Innovative system, specifically tailored to meet the needs of housing repairs.**

The first version of the software was completed in June 2005 and, following a pilot at one of their offices, the system was then rolled-out to the rest of the workforce. All the trade operatives working on repairs and voids were receiving their work through a PDA by early 2005.

Wrekin's mobile system, called '**Hand-e-Work**' is now marketed to other Housing Associations and Local Authorities with a client base of over 12 since its launch only 12 months ago.

In 2006, after significant capital investment in the Trust's homes, Housing benchmarks were indicating that Wrekin needed to reduce its expenditure on response repairs, this coupled to tenants receiving the service **demanding appointments at first point of call** led to further innovative changes to service provision.

Although Wrekin had adopted the mobile working approach, the Trust felt that there was some slack in the repairs activity but they couldn't identify where it was. It was at this stage that they decided to introduce an automated work scheduling system into the repairs process.

The full scheduling system went 'live' on 1st August 2006, and immediately started to deliver benefits.

As well as introducing mobile working, in July 2005 the Trust entered into a Supply Chain Partnership with a national builders merchant (Travis Perkins) with the aim of significantly reducing the cost of materials. This partnership includes integration with the mobile working system and single order and invoice arrangements through EDI (Electronic Data Interchange).

### **The summary of the Solution**

The Trust has 64 trade operatives undertaking emergency, urgent and routine response repairs. Their diaries are held in the automatic scheduling system and they receive all their work through a PDA using the in house developed Hand e Work software.

When a tenant reports a repair to the Trust's call-centre the job is logged on the Housing IT system and passed into the scheduler. This enables the call taker to view available slots and confirm an appointment with the tenant at first point of call. Each evening the scheduling system optimises the work for the following day. Office-based planners have access to the schedule to move jobs around to cope with variations and emergencies that occur during the day.

The repairs operatives start from home each morning, when starting work, the operative request their first job, which will arrive on the PDA within five minutes. The operative records the start and finish of each job. Completing a job automatically triggers the sending of the next job to the PDA. The tenant signs on the PDA to confirm that the job has been completed.

Completing the job also generates an email to the call-centre, giving the address and job completion time. The call-centre is then able to ring the tenant within a few minutes of the repair having been completed to undertake a short satisfaction survey – this is currently done on a 10% sample of completed jobs. For all repairs, the job completion details in the IBS back office system are automatically updated from the completion details sent from the PDA. The PDAs are equipped with photo and video facilities enabling the recording of visual evidence where necessary.

The tradesmen carry an imprest material stock in the van, and any materials used on a job are recorded using the PDA. This generates an order for replenishment stock that is sent directly to Travis Perkins (the supply chain partner), and each tradesman can elect either to collect his replenishment stock from the branch or to have it delivered to home or site on a particular day.

Wrekin use the IBS OpenHousing and OpenContractor back-office systems, integrated with the Xbrace Opti-time scheduling system. The mobile solution (Hand-e-Work) and the e-business solution were written in-house, and Orange provides the phone network.

### **Efficiencies Achieved - Hard**

Following the introduction of the scheduling system and the consequent increase in productivity, Wrekin have already transferred 22 of the response repairs

workforce over to planned (capital) work that would otherwise have been let to external contractors.

The direct salary cost savings on the response repairs budget equates to £1.2 million in the current financial year against 2006/07

Service innovation has also produced, significant savings in material and invoicing processing costs through the introduction of the Supply Chain Partnership and the associated ebusiness processes.

The gross savings on materials over the period from July 2006 until March 2007 (compared with the actual annual spend during the year before the partnership) equates to £309k. The net salary cost saving on invoice processing and administrative staff (after redundancy and other costs have been taken into account) over the same period is £78k.

The efficiencies achieved from the mobile solution and innovation in repairs have been a significant factor enabling the Trust to reduce its overall expenditure on Responsive Repairs and Voids each year. (The following table illustrates the cost reductions achieved.)

<b>Year</b>	<b>Responsive and Void Repair Cost</b>
2004/05 (before the mobile solution)	£9 million
2005/06	£8.4 Million
2006/07	£7.2 Million
2007/08	£6.4 Million

#### **4 Efficiencies Achieved - Soft**

Before mobile working was introduced in the Trust, there was a whole industry around the issue and collection of job tickets, timesheets and other paperwork.

The use of PDAs to record and transfer all the information electronically has resulted in a significant reduction in paperwork, which has released spare capacity for office staff to focus on other more effective work.

The introduction of mobile working, and in particular scheduling, has enabled the capture of much more accurate and timely data about jobs, including timings and variations. Fewer mistakes are made in the recording and reporting of job information. As jobs are scheduled more efficiently and staff move over onto planned work (where crew-busses are used instead of vans) there will be a reduction in vehicle and fuel usage.

Tenants had always been very satisfied with the repairs service at Wrekin, but at a recent series of focus groups, tenants said that the one thing that really annoyed them was not being able to make an appointment when they report the repair, and having to wait for someone to ring them back. The introduction of scheduling has meant that tenants can now be given an appointment when they ring to report the repair.

The call-centre now makes appointments for over 85% of repair jobs at first contact.

The ability of the call-centre to know within a few minutes that a job has been completed enables them to contact the tenant and complete a satisfaction survey at a time when there is still a high probability that they will be at home and the work is still fresh in their minds. Customer satisfaction with the repairs service stands at 99% compared to 89% prior to introducing innovations

### **Future Potential Efficiencies**

Further efficiencies in supervisory staff are anticipated as the scheduling system and the planners now do most of the work previously done by supervisors.

Other planned enhancements and future efficiencies include:

- The provision of outstanding materials orders and requisitions to tradesmen on the PDA to provide visibility of what's outstanding and enable them to check orders in time
- A checklist for gas and electrical inspections including the creation of legal documents from PDA
- Better asbestos risk information will be sent to the PDA with each job
- Stock condition surveys will be undertaken on PDAs
- Use of PDA's and software in Housing Management

### **Learning Points**

- Mobile working and innovative software on its own doesn't improve performance – culture change is needed.
- Involve the workforce from the outset and use them to 'sell' the solution.
- Don't underestimate the training and technical support overhead needed.
- Make the introduction of any innovative working practices **fun**

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