

National Housing Maintenance Forum

Aberdeen City Council

Submission for

Most innovative DLO

Aberdeen is Scotland's third largest city. Since the discovery of North Sea oil forty years ago the 'Granite City's' economy has flourished and it has become known as the 'Energy Capital of Europe'

Serving the city and providing a vital infrastructure for the population of 200,000 is Aberdeen City Council. The Council has responsibility for roads, schools, social services and over 22,000 homes and properties.

Improving customer service and maintaining and modernising these homes was a key priority with Aberdeen City Council spending around £23 million on housing and property repairs each year. Around 75% of this budget is allocated for work carried out by the Council's in-house Building Services (DLO). This service directly employed around 250 craft workers.

Whilst the Council wished to tailor its services to meet the needs of the tenants, it was evident that the craft workers existing terms and conditions and working practices had become a barrier to this modernised service.

There was a need to move away from the traditional regime that had evolved during the period of compulsory complete tendering and move towards a service that focused on the principles of best value. A review of the service highlighted the existing bonus provision was outdated and performance figures were poor with recruitment of craft workers difficult and morale low. As working practices had evolved the Council's tradespeople or craft workers were prevented from responding to these changes.

The Council recognised the need for promoting a work-life balance for its staff and it also realised the vital importance of ensuring a concentrated focus on customer services and ensuring the highest quality of work was provided for the tenants.

### *The approach to the challenge was bold and decisive*

Working closely with the craft workers to produce new ways of working and supporting these through software implementation and development it has been possible to turn the service around.

### **Savings Realised**

With the full implementation of the craft workers agreement and introduction of the software necessary to support new ways of working the housing service recorded efficiency savings of £1.5 million and productivity has increased by 20% for the financial year 2008/09. The number of jobs attended by each person per week has increased from 21.5 jobs in 2008 to 25.8 in 2009, staff turnover has been reduced, morale increased and higher levels of satisfaction recorded by tenants.

For 2008-09 over £1 million of housing capital works was been carried out - this would not have been possible several years ago. Overall turnover rose to approximately £18million and there is a strong recognition that the service's core objective is to deliver a high quality improved housing repairs service.

#### Question 1:

What is innovative about the service provided?

### **An innovative 'double layer' approach**

Through discussion with staff, research and seeking advice a 'double layer' solution was proposed for the service. This comprised of:

1. a new craft workers agreement
2. improved, tailor-made software to support the craft workers

#### **1. The craft workers agreement**

The first stage in this modernising process was to develop and implement new ways of working that were feasible, affordable, supportive of staff and enabled a more responsive, customer-focused approach or service delivery.

This was achieved through proposing a craft workers agreement that directly contributed to the delivery of better homes for citizens and also supported the Council's aim to retain and recruit a skilled workforce.

Responding to the Council's Community Plan and Single Outcome agreement to deliver high quality, best value services, raise performance to a higher standard and foster a total commitment to customer care the craft workers agreement was prepared and developed through close consultation with staff.

Meetings were held with the Trades Unions to move the matter forward. From initial distrust and suspicion on both sides these negotiations began on an unsteady foundation. A way forward was found with the introduction of a new management structure working at the most senior management levels to engage with all employees and unions. The objectives of the agreement were laid out at meetings led by the Chief Executive. Staff also attended both mass and small group presentations, received personal letters from the Council and were provided with an opportunity to have any questions answered by management.

The main objective at all times was to secure an agreement that met the work/life balance for the 250 craft operatives and the requirements tenants residing in the 22,000 properties.

#### **2. Improved, tailor-made software to modernise the service and support the craft workers**

To enable the successful introduction of the craft workers agreement, service support and provision had to be improved. Key to this was an updating and revision of IT software and the need to respond to an identified need for online, real time IT support.

*Consilium* is the product name for a specialist online booking system created for reporting faults and scheduling repairs. This software was chosen in 2007 following a European-wide procurement process as a way of updating the existing process by which Aberdeen City Council manages housing repairs. The flexibility of the system made it particularly suitable for combining with the Council's new ways of working.

The online software enables many users to access the booking system in various locations across the city. These include customer contact centres, individual depots, and staff members working on jobs. As the software is based on a *Microsoft Windows* layout and display screens, the appearance of the software is familiar and straight forward. This reduces the amount of training time required for users.

However, the real strength of the software system was its ability to accommodate and enhance many of the Council's existing working practices such as flexitime hours and mobile working. By supporting these established working practices the Council was able to focus on improving the service to tenants, increasing efficiency in support systems, cutting waiting times, and delivering high standards of customer service.

From the beginning of the project the Council worked very closely with *Consilium's* developers. With over 22,000 properties to maintain and modernise Aberdeen City Council quickly became *Consilium's* biggest testing and development project as they ensured their system would be able to manage and schedule around 3000 individual jobs each week.

## **How it works**

When a call reporting a problem is reported to the Council's customer service centre the staff use a diagnostic system to identify the most likely cause of the problem. This investigative system also enables service centre staff to assess whether it is an emergency or high priority repair and to arrange a convenient time for the tenant to be at home for the repair to be carried out.

From the moment a fault is reported by a tenant to the Council, *Consilium* follows each step of the repair. This includes scheduling an appointment for the repair to take place, allocating the craft workers and materials to the job, ensuring the materials are selected from the stock warehouse and delivered to the house, right through to the completion of the job. After the repair has been completed there is then a final check to make sure the tenant is satisfied with the repair.

As well as enabling the tenant's repairs to be carried out *Consilium* also links to further Council systems including reordering stock parts used, monitoring stock levels, linking to the billing and invoicing service for each job as well as pricing for labour and materials, to create a fast, synchronised system of work.

## Case Study.

Mr Houseman lives by himself in Craigallan Street on the far side of the city. Following a recent storm he discovered several tiles had blown off his roof and rain water has got in causing a lot of damage to the ceiling. He is concerned that with more bad weather forecast the damage will become much worse spreading to other rooms in the house.

He phones the Council's contact centre where a customer service assistant takes his call. Whilst the customer service assistant is not familiar with the house, or the level of structural repair required they are trained in the use of *Consilium's* diagnostic screens. By asking Mr Houseman questions they are able to determine the scale of the damage and repairs required.

As the damage is severe and could be reaching his ceiling lights, the repair is marked as urgent. As Mr Houseman is out for the rest of the day, an appointment is fixed for first thing the following morning.

One of the Council's craft workers lives two streets away from Mr Houseman. The appointment is sent to his electronic diary. As he begins work each day at 8.30am he only needs to travel two streets to his first appointment rather than across the city to the work depot to pick up his first call and then set off back the way he came to Mr Houseman's repair. However, the slater doesn't have the materials. He visits Mr Houseman, and does an initial estimate of the materials required and whether and electrician is also required for the repair. In this case he does. The repair materials are picked up from the depot by a works van and delivered to the slater who is still working on Mr Houseman's repair. Following a visit from the electrician, also located by *Consilium* as being closest to the property, the job is complete and the workers move on to their next jobs. All that remains is a final call programmed in to *Consilium* to make sure Mr Houseman is satisfied with the work that has been carried out at his home.

## Question 2: What are the benefits?

Following the development and introduction of updated ways of working in the 'new craft workers agreement', tenants, workers, the neighbourhood and the Council have all benefited from the modernisation of the service with improved efficiency and productivity.

### The benefits to the contractor:

- An increase in basic pay
- Pension benefits increased as a result of this improved basic pay
- Access to more flexible working arrangements to suit workers' needs as well as the needs of the service.
- Opportunities to contract for additional hours to a maximum of 45 hours per week
- Effective management of hours in line with the European Working Time Directive
- Less reliance on sub-contractors and agency personnel
- Increased and newer fleet with facility for stocked vans

- Improved job security
- An ability to pick your own deal with the number of hours worked and working patterns
- Additional recruitment of craft apprentices
- Increase in job satisfaction, which has resulted in increased motivation to perform, higher morale amongst staff and a reduction in absenteeism

#### The benefits to the client:

- Cost certainty providing effective budgetary control
- A reduction in overtime costs
- Increased productivity and better motivated workforce
- Multi-skilling is formalised as part of job descriptions for all roles
- The cost of repairs service will be less
- Ability to move into Capital Improvements Works
- Enhanced relationship with Craft Trade Unions
- The move from traditional bonus scheme enabled administrative staff to carry out work with scheduling of resources thereby adding value to the service
- Quicker turnaround of lets for temporary homelessness flats
- A reduced reliance on sub-contractors has meant twenty additional tradesmen were recruited to the service.

#### The benefits to the residents:

- For the first time customers are able to make appointments for repair work up until 8pm, Monday to Friday and between 8am and 4pm on Saturdays
- Response times for emergency and non emergency repairs have been reduced ( 11% average increase in performance)
- Repairs to empty properties are completed more quickly and to a higher standard
- Greater efficiency assists rents to remain at an affordable level

#### The benefits to the neighbourhood:

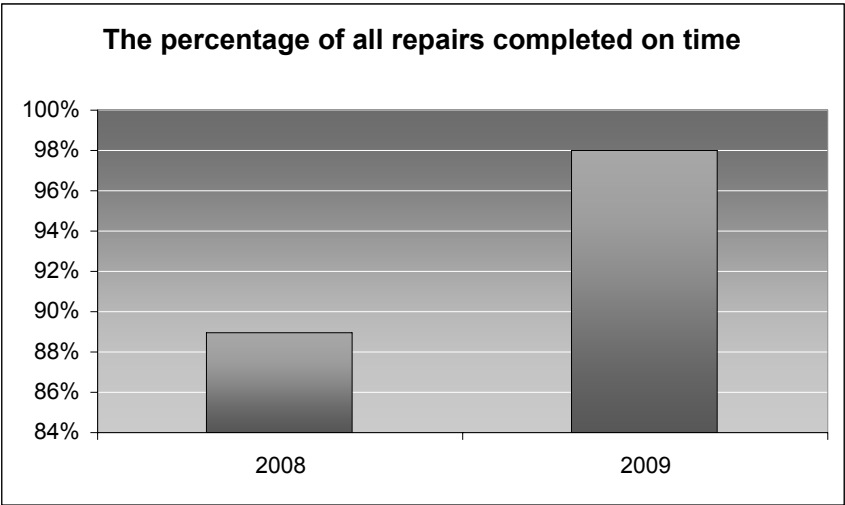
- There is more opportunity for routine maintenance and a reduction in reactive repair work
- Links to the housing asset management plan results in a better quality of the housing stock
- Reduction in the number of 'voids', more houses occupied means improved neighbourhoods and communities
- Increased motivation to perform their tasks quickly and to a high standard has also helped to boost the reputation of the craft-workers amongst the citizens
- It helps raise the appearance of communities across the city and in so doing raise the self-worth and self-belief of some of our most disadvantaged people.

#### Question 3: What were the financial costs and cashable benefits?

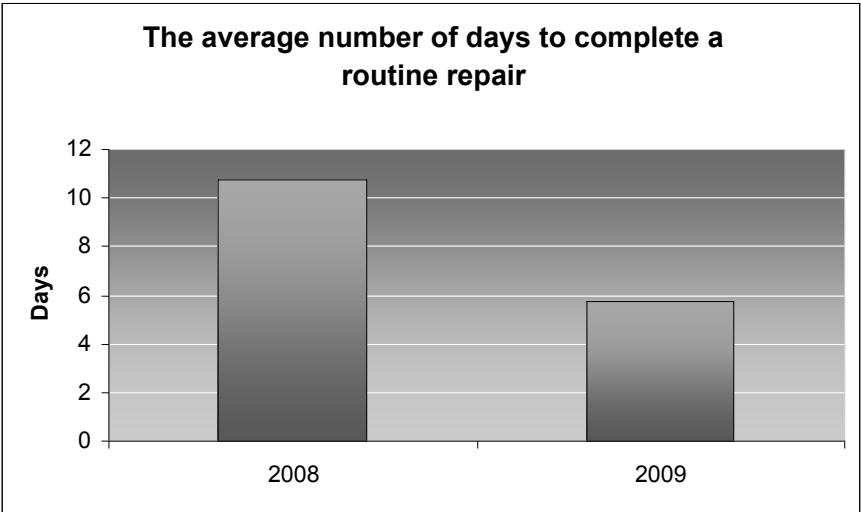
##### Maximising Efficiency

Since the combined introduction of the craft workers agreement and *Consilium* there has been a marked increase in the number of repairs taking place in houses across the city. On average an extra one or two jobs are completed every day.

Figures produced for the two year period demonstrate that in 2008 89% of repairs were completed on time. However, with the combined introduction of the craft workers agreements and the *Consilium* software this figure increased to 98%



*Consilium* enables craft-workers to operate locally and removes large amounts of travelling before and after each repair job. A further benefit of this very efficient system is the reduction of exhaust emissions and congestion across the city. Delivery vans are available to supply any parts or materials which the craft-worker may require but not have in his van's stock, by ordering it on the booking system. This means the worker is able to stay at the location until the job has been completed, maximising time spent on repairs and minimising travel time.



Since introduction, the system's efficiency has resulted in considerable savings for Aberdeen City Council. The number of days it takes to complete a repair has improved considerably as illustrated in the table above. Previously the figure was 10.75 days for a repair to be completed. With the combined craftworkers agreement and *Consilium* this figure has dropped to 5.75 days, almost half the time.

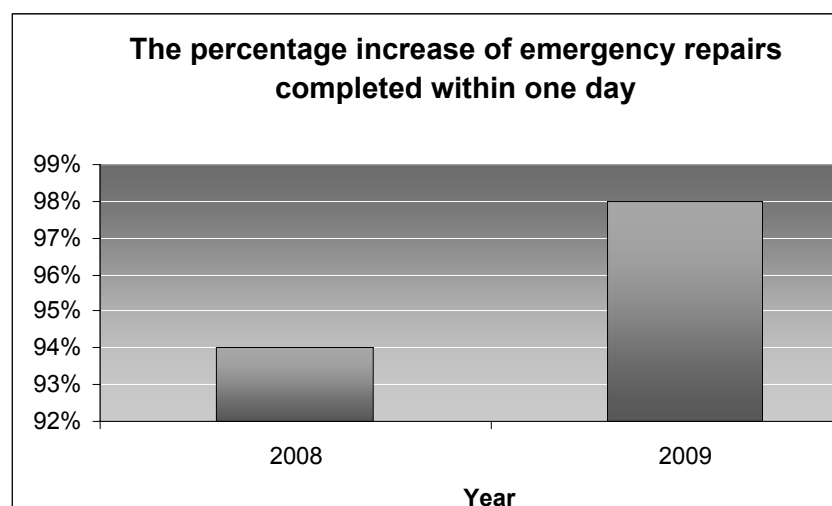
The time that was previously wasted in driving between the depot and job locations, which could be on opposite sides of the City, is now saved, meaning that that time can be put to use on other jobs, creating a more efficient team.

Increasing the amount of time spent repairing properties also means maximising the amount of time of funding spent directly 'on the job'. As well as this it meant that less fuel is being used by vans to travel city-wide, which also results in savings for Aberdeen City Council.

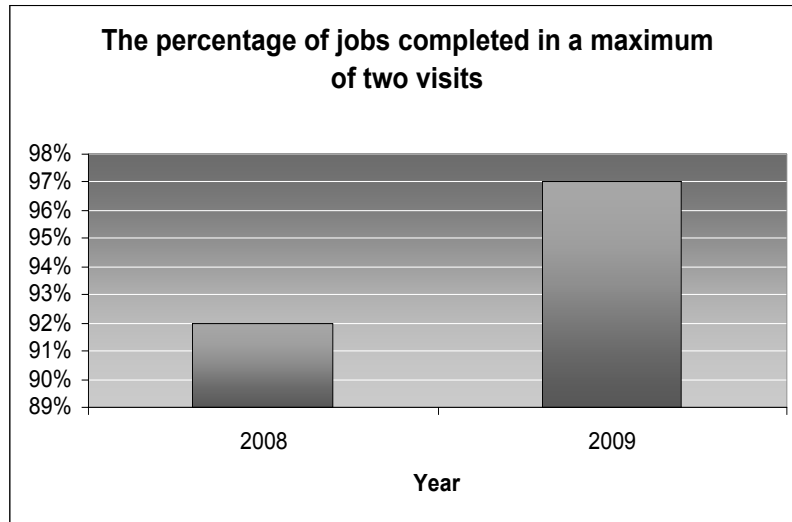
## Prioritisation of Emergencies

The diagnostic system within *Consilium* enables the recognition and prioritisation of emergencies. The scheduling system can then identify a craft-worker in close proximity to attend to the repair. This also results in potential savings for the Council as it means that the repair – for example a burst water pipe – has not had the time to do as much damage and so requires less time and money being repaired.

This approach has delivered benefits for both emergency and non-emergency repairs. In 2008 the number of emergency repairs completed in one visit was just 94%. By 2009 this had improved to 98%:



An improvement in the percentage of non-emergency jobs has also been achieved. In 2008 the number of non emergency jobs taking just two visits to complete was already quite high at 92%. Within one year the number had increased to 97%. Please see the table below:



## Alerts

*Consilium's* system of alerts enables the Council to keep customers informed. Email and SMS messages are sent to customers to inform them if a worker may be late for their appointment and if this is not suitable will rearrange appointments for a later date.

The alert system is also beneficial for repair staff as it enables equipment and parts to be logged on the system, so when the stock is running low the system sends out an alert to replenish stock.

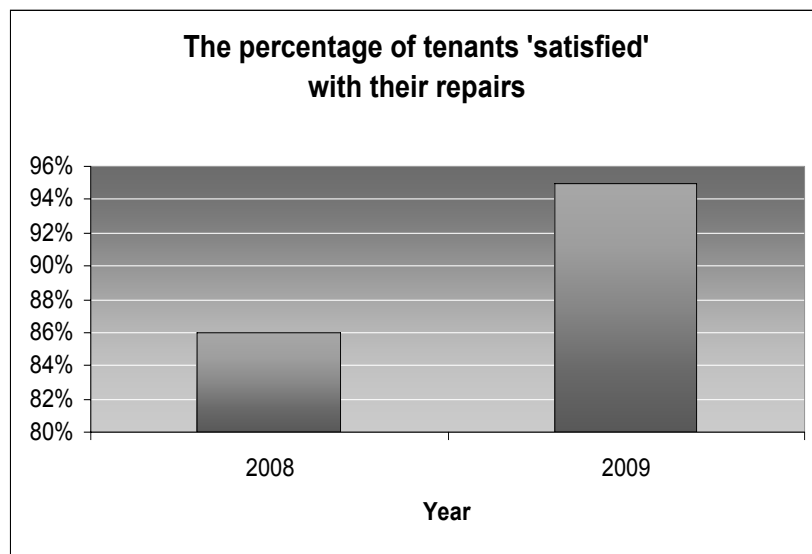
## Additional Benefits

When the worker logs on to his on-board system to check his schedule the system flags up safety alerts to be checked on the vehicle– such as tyre pressure or water levels. When attending a scheduled repair, the alert system also identifies the records of the property and any previous problems or maintenance work carried out at the address in case they are related to the latest problem.

If there has been an abnormally high number of requests for repairs to the property this will also be flagged up on the customer contact centre system, where a request for investigation will be generated.

The scheduling system enables the customer contact centre to generate appointments which are suitable to the customer, so they will no longer have to rearrange their entire day waiting in for the craft worker. Evening appointments are also being scheduled. These are ideal for people who work during the day and would otherwise have to use holiday entitlement to wait in for repair men to arrive. When the job has been completed the customer has the opportunity to comment on the service with follow up calls to check the customer's satisfaction with comments on the worker who attended the repair also logged. This can then be used for customer focused training and to demonstrate a further success measure for the modernisation process with a recorded increase of 86% in 2008 to 95% in 2009. See table below





**Question 4:**

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

The Aberdeen City Council Craft Agreement is recognised by other Local Authorities as a model to replicate. Several Councils have been to see the work being carried out at Aberdeen.

**Future Developments**

The introduction of the double layer approach has contributed to the delivery of better homes for tenants whilst giving staff access to flexible working arrangements.

*The results of this approach are best described as 'win-win'.*

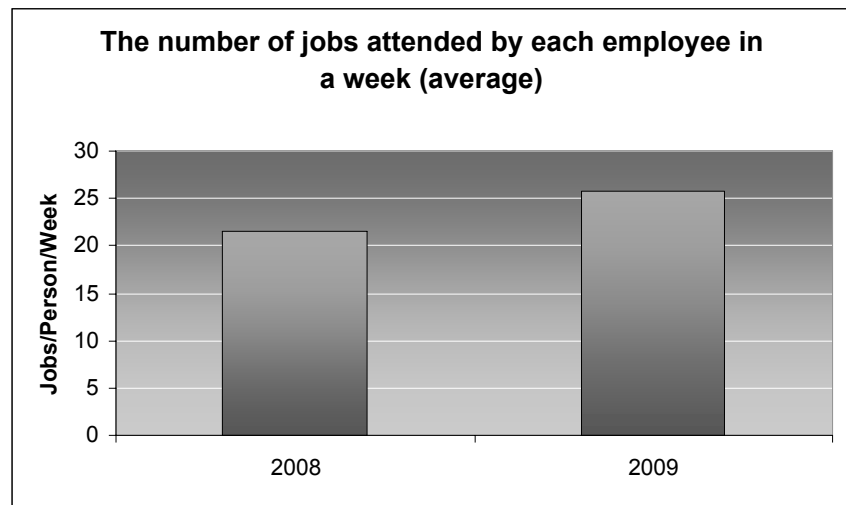
Following development and introduction, the craftworkers agreement has improved efficiency and work output levels. It also has created significant and identifiable benefits for the craft workers, the Council and most importantly tenants.

The provision of services outside normal working hours has made a big difference to working customers who may find it difficult to take time off work and wait in for a repair. The provision of improved housing directly contributes to the Council's goal to improve the quality of life for all citizens. It helps raise the appearance of communities across the city and in so doing raise the self-worth and self-belief of some of our most disadvantaged people.

The overall Housing Services Improvement Programme aims to ensure that the Council meets its commitments as outlined to the Scottish Housing Regulator (including providing a better service by improving standards, performance and value for money; taking into account a reducing housing stock and sustaining satisfactory tenancies).

By combining this approach with improved and updated software it has been possible to demonstrate support, confidence and belief in employees and to work towards realising greater efficiencies, improved working practices and increased satisfaction amongst tenants. The

results speak for themselves with a huge increase in the number of jobs attended by each employee every week. This has increased from 21.5% through to 25.8% in the space of one year.



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