

# Responding

to customer needs



**National Housing Maintenance Forum  
Best Practice Awards 2010  
Category - the most innovative Direct Labour Organisation**

# **HOUSING SOLUTIONS**

Entry for National Housing Maintenance Forum

Best Practice Awards 2010

Category - the most innovative Direct Labour Organisation

Housing Solutions is a Maidenhead based housing association providing affordable housing for families, single people and key workers, as well as specialist accommodation for older people and people with learning difficulties.

The Association employs its own Direct Labour force which includes a Trades Team of 26, made up of carpenters, apprentices, bricklayers, labourers, gas fitters, electricians and plasterers and a seven strong team of Neighbourhood Wardens who look after communal areas and estates.

This team provides a responsive repairs service, planned maintenance programme and aids and adaptations service for our stock of more than 4,200 homes. It also maintains 1,500 homes for another housing association.

## **CUSTOMER SERVICE STRATEGY**

More and more of our customers are working with us to help shape our homes and services to meet their specific needs. We have changed the way we work to make sure that customers' views are taken into account in everything we do.

We hold annual Customer Service Forums to provide us with customer priorities on how we can improve our services and where time and money should be spent.

Our residents join staff on Working Groups and Best Value Reviews to look at everything we do and work with us to come up with ideas for improving services and value for money. We never forget that many 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 and the services and homes we provide.

## **CONTACT**

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# WHAT IS INNOVATIVE ABOUT THE SERVICE PROVIDED?

## DELIVERING A CUSTOMER-LED SERVICE

Housing Solutions has revolutionised the way it deals with the maintenance of its properties. And for our customers the service has never been better. In the last two years we have cut the average time taken to do all repairs from nine days to just six days without any increase in costs.

In response to customers' feedback we radically overhauled our responsive repairs service in April 2008.

We were delighted when the changes won us a NHMF Best Practice award in early 2009. But this was just the starting point. Since January 2009 we have seen the full impact and the results of the changes we made in April 2008.

Since then we have now made more changes to build on the successful initiatives we launched as pilot schemes. We have also extended the working practices we put in place for our repairs service to cover the maintenance of communal areas.

All the changes we have made are designed to improve service, delivery greater value for money and meet our customers' needs. This means that if we make an improvement in one area that incurs a cost increase, it has to be matched with efficiency in another, without compromising service standards.

We have managed to improve the service without increasing costs. In fact we have reduced some of our costs by introducing initiatives such as the Home MOT and Handyman service which produced savings of more than £150,000 in the last financial year and are expected to provide greater cost savings in the current year.

# WHAT IS INNOVATIVE ABOUT THE SERVICE PROVIDED?

## MAINTAINING COMMUNAL AREAS

We have put together new local service standards for the cleaning and general maintenance of communal areas in partnership with our customers.

This covers everything from cleaning communal stairways through to working with our residents to regularly inspect all neighborhoods, to highlight issues before they become major problems.

To deliver this new service we have introduced new ways of working for our Neighbourhood Wardens Team. They are now an integral part of our Direct Labour organisation and they work to the same scheduling and inspection regime that our Trades Team use to deliver our successful responsive repairs service.

Work that was previously done on an ad hoc basis is done to a rota which is displayed in communal areas for customers to check. All work is now scheduled using Opti-Time and is inspected to maintain quality.

We have taken on the services of a window cleaner and have contract cleaners to cover sickness and holidays, so that standards are never compromised.

To maintain neighbourhoods in good conditions we have also introduced:

- Monthly neighbourhood inspections with a four week response time for dealing with any actions that arise from these;
- A roving caretaking service to troubleshoot problem areas;
- A £5 rubbish collection service to discourage fly tipping;
- A new response time for dealing with offensive graffiti.

**CUSTOMER SATISFACTION WITH COMMUNAL MAINTENANCE HAS INCREASED FROM 60% TO 85%  
IN 2009.**

# WHAT IS INNOVATIVE ABOUT THE SERVICE PROVIDED?

## THE HOME MOT

This was originally introduced in 2008 as a pilot scheme to reduce heavy usage of our responsive repairs service by 100 customers, now it is being rolled out to 500 customers.

On average, our customers use the responsive repair service four times a year, but a minority used it 40 times a year and these customers generated ten per cent of all responsive repair call-outs. In 2008 the top 100 users of our repairs service were invited to take part in a Home MOT pilot. Sixty-six signed up to the scheme and received a visit from our maintenance team who checked the condition of their properties and carried out any necessary repairs. These were mostly minor repairs.

Customers who took part were offered a £100 no claims bonus if:

- They did not use the repairs service over the next twelve months, except for emergency repairs;
- Their home was kept in good condition and they had allowed access for an annual gas safety check;
- They had a clear rent account and no neighbour nuisance issues.

The customer response to this initiative was very positive. The 64 customers who took part reduced their use of the repairs services by 66 per cent. Six customers qualified for the £100 bonus and four customers received a smaller bonus in recognition of the efforts they had made to reduce usage of the service.

Nearly all of the 34 customers who decided not to take part in the scheme also independently reduced their use of the responsive repairs service.

**THE HOME MOT COST £2,380 - IT SAVED £87,000 IN REPAIR COSTS IN 2008/09**

# WHAT IS INNOVATIVE ABOUT THE SERVICE PROVIDED?

## KEY FINDINGS

Our customers responded really positively to the Home MOT service and 100 per cent said the service should continue. Even those who chose not to take part responded positively by independently reducing their use of the repairs service.

We also saw at first hand how challenged our disabled customers were by repairs and how little basic DIY knowledge single parents had.

## WHAT NEXT FOR THE HOME MOT?

The Home MOT has been cited as an example of Good Practice by The Chartered Institute of Housing, so, we have been keen to develop this initiative further.

We are introducing quarterly household checks for our disabled customers and for single parents - to help them keep their properties in good condition.

We are also extending the original Home MOT beyond the top 100 users by writing to the top 500 users and advising them of their usage.

Our evidence suggests that just advising customers of their usage has a positive effect on their behaviour. The top 100 users will continue to receive the Home MOT visit. We hope that this planned approach to maintenance will reduce the number of responsive repair call-outs.

# WHAT IS INNOVATIVE ABOUT THE SERVICE PROVIDED?

## HANDYMAN SERVICE

A new Handyman Service introduced in 2008 to deal with responsive repairs at Supported Housing stock, which is spread across three counties, has been extended to cover communal areas and our Sheltered Housing Schemes.

Responsive repairs requests for Supported Housing, were originally dealt with as repair requests were made, but this meant multiple visits to sites often to deal with minor problems.

The introduction of the Supported Housing Handyman Service achieved a 45 per cent reduction in maintenance visits to these properties during 2008/09 and savings of £70,000.

As a result staff are spending less time travelling to and from these sites, their carbon footprint is reduced and they have more time to spend maintaining properties in good condition. Our customers are much happier with the service, so we are extending this popular service to improve maintenance in other areas which we feel will benefit from this dedicated service.

We are hoping to see similar results and savings from extending this service to communal areas and sheltered schemes.

We now have two full-time multi skilled trade staff who provide a dedicated repairs service across these three areas. They visit all sites on a regular basis to carry out repairs, as well as routine maintenance such as the testing of fire and smoke alarms.

**THE HANDYMAN SERVICE GENERATED SAVINGS OF £70,000 LAST YEAR.**

## KEEPING APPOINTMENTS

We are now keeping 98 per cent of all responsive repair appointments and we want to maintain this high level of service.

We have extended our text messaging service to remind customers about their appointments. They now get a text message to confirm the date and time of their appointment slot time on the day they report a repair.

The day before an appointment, customers are sent another reminder.

On the day of the appointment our trades staff now call half an hour before they are due to arrive, to let the customer know that they are on their way.

**LEVELS OF APPOINTMENTS MADE AND KEPT IS RUNNING IN EXCESS OF 98%.**

## WHAT WERE THE FINANCIAL COSTS AND CASHABLE BENEFITS?

We have seen dramatic increases in customer satisfaction and reductions in cost as a result of all the changes to improve our services.

- The average time taken to complete a repair is now less than six days – down from 9 days in 2007/8.
- Customer satisfaction with communal areas has increased by 25% to 85% with the introduction of new standards and dynamic work scheduling.
- Customer satisfaction with responsive repairs has increased to 94%.
- Levels of appointments made and kept is running in excess of 98%.
- 97% of emergency repairs are being dealt with within four hours – when the industry standard is 24 hours.
- The costs of our Home MOT pilot were £2,380. The scheme saved £87,000 in one year and 100% of customers who took part said the scheme should be continued.
- Our supported Handyman Service reduced call outs to Supported Housing stock by 45 per cent and saved £70,000 in its first year of operation.



## WHAT LESSONS MIGHT BE LEARNED BY OTHER ORGANISATIONS?

For us, involving, listening and responding to our customers is key to everything we do.

In the last year hundreds of our customers have been involved in our work. We have changed the way we work to make sure that their views are taken into account in everything we do.

All major departments hold annual Customer Services Forums. These are designed to provide us with customer priorities on how we can improve everything we do and where time and money should be spent.

In the last twelve months our customers have worked with us to continue to reshape our repairs service, to help us set new service standards for communal areas, to redesign our quarterly customer newsletter and to help us review our annual gas safety procedure.

Any company that wants to deliver a service that meets its customers' needs could benefit from this approach, but it does require a flexible approach to developing new services and real commitment to listening and responding to what your customers tell you.

**"THE REPAIRS AND MAINTENANCE SERVICE HAS REALLY EVOLVED IN THE LAST TWELVE MONTHS TO PROVIDE AN EVEN BETTER SERVICE TO RESIDENTS. THIS IS REALLY GOOD NEWS FOR EVERYONE AND A REAL RESULT FOR CUSTOMER INVOLVEMENT."**

**RACHEL BONNER, CHAIR OF MDHA RESIDENTS' ASSOCIATION**