

NHMF Best Practice Awards 2009

Client best at meeting residents' needs



Residents Shirley Stenchion, Rhoda Blunden and Jean Ward with Phil Lawrence from KHT Property Services



Introduction

Great Places Housing Group is a fast-growing housing association with ambitions to continue to expand while constantly improving its already excellent customer service.

Owning and managing more than 15,000 homes in 30 council areas across the north, the landlord is also a renowned developer and regenerator, creating homes to rent and buy that are as desirable as they are affordable, transforming areas that might have seemed like they would never thrive or be vibrant again.

Great Places was founded in 2006 when two associations joined. Over the next 18 months, two more associations joined and major stock transfer in Sheffield involved another group of new employees swelling the ranks to over 600. Consultation on group simplification started in early 2009 and in November, subsidiary boards were collapsed and members became one association, using the Great Places identity.

The geographical area that Great Places covers is diverse, and so are its client groups and stock types. Residents include people of many ethnic backgrounds with differing housing management needs and expectations. The group also has in its portfolio several sheltered housing schemes

for elderly residents and 1,500 supported housing places for vulnerable people who require 24-hour staffing and one-to-one support, from care leavers and teenage parents to people with drug or alcohol problems, or mental health issues.

Stock ranges from large 1930s former local authority neighbourhoods to Victorian terraces in dense Manchester and Lancashire districts, to key worker accommodation attached to hospitals, as well as a range of flagship new-build apartments and family homes that add up to some of the very best affordable and social housing provision around. This means repairs are wide-ranging – much more so than, say, for a city stock transfer association.

To meet obligations and aspirations of such diverse people in differing homes – in so many geographical areas – the group's property services team provides a consistent standard of service, rigorously monitored and regularly reassessed, that's flexible and responsive and undergoing constant refinement. This application concerns a mammoth three-pronged overhaul process, starting with an ordinary service and turning it into an extra-ordinary one that is super-streamlined, extremely efficient and always customer

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focused. The group's vision, values and culture earned it a placing of 61 in this year's Sunday Times Best 100 Companies to Work

For and a positive, can-do attitude pervades in all operational divisions including property services. A customer service strategy provides the blueprint for our exemplary way of doing things, which is always focused on reflecting the needs and aspirations of customers.

Our slogan, summing up our vision, is "Strong, bright and real" – a mantra embodied by our approach to repairs and maintenance. We are strong – always be bold and energetic in our approach to involving customers; bright – we will look to involve our customers in as many new, innovative and colourful ways as possible; and real – our customers will keep our feet on the ground and by involving them in every aspect of our business this will ensure we are customer focused.

We know that fairness and accountability is essential, as is knowing and valuing our customers and the communities in which they live. We also recognise that our residents are key to our success and without them, our business would not grow or improve.

Great Places Property Services – Meeting our customers' needs

Our vision is to provide an excellent customer-driven service that represents best practice in the sector. Within the property services division, we aim to provide an upper-quartile repairs service to residents at no more than median cost, and to continually improve value for money through increasing customer satisfaction, reduced cost or both.

In December 2008, Great Places re-launched its transformed repairs service, bringing on board new contractors Connaught and KHT Housing Services alongside established partners Cruden and Kier. This was to streamline repairs and maintenance groupwide for the first time, meaning that all tenants of the relatively young group could expect a consistent level of service.

A new base was set up at the group's Salford office at St James House, Pendleton, to focus on the considerable task of creating a service that did so much more than 'what it says

on the tin'.

In formulating this new-look provision, customer feedback on the service they got and the service they wanted was key to the process. Early proof that the revamped system was achieving high satisfaction levels was when the team involved in the delivery of the service won Great Places' Tenants Award – an accolade awarded by members of the Great Places tenants' panel to reward staff for going the extra mile.

How our service is innovative

Great Places often conducts detailed surveys with tenants to see how we are performing. Carefully extracted data from such surveys were used as initial intelligence in beginning to shape what our new, improved service should look and feel like.

The next step was to involve residents in discussion groups where participants had the time and space to really get to the bottom of what they wanted and expected, and why. Training in how such services are delivered was offered and eagerly attended beforehand, by residents who were keen to understand the way we worked, and make informed contributions and decisions.

A total of 21 people took part, of a range of ages, ethnicity and geographical backgrounds. They were recruited through neighbourhood staff who enthusiastically spread the word on their patches about the research under way and opportunities to get involved. Sessions pinpointed different aspects of services such as call handling and relet standards and the majority of participants made it clear that it was our customer service, rather than the quality of actual repairs, that were in need of attention. Points on their wishlist included:

- *Longer opening times for call centre*
- *Appointments to be made at first contact*
- *Better communication around appointments*
- *Shorter response times – 4 hours for emergencies, 3 working days for urgencies and 15 days for routine issues*
- *Two-hour appointment slots*
- *More efforts to fix problems first-time*
- *Evening and weekend appointments*
- *Checking tenants' profiles to make operatives aware of vulnerability issues*

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The workshops told us what the service should do, and we set about selecting contractors to achieve residents' vision. During the procurement process, we kept things flexible so that we could decide later on matters such as whether the contractor should handle calls, or whether we should have a separate contract for gas servicing.

Tenants were fully involved in the process and the criteria were set to encompass a wide variety of concerns – quality, financial, social, and environmental.

Some tenants continued in a more specific role, accompanying us on visits to call centres of companies shortlisted for the contract. Managers and operatives were interviewed thoroughly with useful results. As part of our requirements, we asked would-be contractors whether they would have agreed levels of staff who could speak other languages, to recognise the diversity of tenants.

The two contractors we chose are different kinds of organisations – one is a large plc and the other is a social housing provider, who are now working alongside our existing partnering contractors. As well as covering risk, there is the potential for contractors to learn from each other, meaning that together we can benchmark, share, compete and develop best practice.

Conditions of the contract include:

- *Equality and diversity training for operatives*
- *Call handlers at contractors answering the phone as 'Great Places' to aid brand development and a sense of joined-up working*
- *Training day for call handlers to iron out any obstacles to providing a quality customer service*
- *Recruitment of community language-speaking call handlers*
- *Evening and Saturday appointments*
- *Longer call centre hours*

Two other innovations in procurement were:

- *To consider the costs of TUPE – transfer of some employees between contractors – separately. This is the biggest area of risk for new contractors but because we knew our existing contractors well, we knew there would likely be little TUPE. The total cost of TUPE amounted to 0.2% of contract costs – considerably less than contractors would have priced*

- *Exclusion of call centre costs from the tender, with the contract saying that the size and costs should be mutually agreed. We couldn't afford a customer service centre that was too expensive, but neither could we get the service tenants wanted if it was provided too cheaply.*

The restructure of the property services team

Our repairs service was previously delivered by three teams – one for each member housing association – of traditional building surveyors who were focused more on properties than service. Tenants told us they were happy with the technical aspects and that what they wanted was great service.

To achieve this, we created a completely new role – Property Services Coordinator. There are three parts to the job – providing customer service, ensuring the contractors deliver the term brief and our vision, and straightforward technical application, with support from our investment and technical surveyors.

We appointed nine new staff, with no compulsory redundancy – the key selection criterion being customer service. Those appointed more closely reflect the diversity of our tenant profile with four women appointed. Technical responsibilities have been largely transferred to contractors – one of the advantages being that inspection and fix can often be completed in the same visit.

During our Customer Service Excellence Assessment in November 2009, this role was praised as very positive and one where staff are empowered to put things right for tenants themselves. Our contractors do most pre-inspections and often complete work in the same visit – saving costs and reducing hassle for tenants.

We also appointed a Customer Involvement Coordinator



Supported housing resident Chris, Kilmartin, above, and customer involvement coordinator Tracy Gregory

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specifically for property services. This was not the traditional role of liaising with tenants and resolving problems. We see this as part of everyone's job and the coordinator's role is to support staff in doing so, for example by sharing and developing consistent good practice across the team.

We needed to be a single group-wide service, not three services, and the contractors needed to be part of the team. We set up in a single location, with two of the contractors teams based in our building and the third in its existing office nearby. The improvement in communication and operational effectiveness due to this arrangement has been significant.



The Hussain family at home in Northmoor, Manchester

Why innovation was necessary

Following a tenants' survey in 2007 where satisfaction with repairs was below average for the sector, we decided we needed to make significant change if we were to achieve our goals. We had around 20 different contractors, three internal call centres, traditional staffing roles and a lot of inconsistency – we were not going to make big improvement without addressing these fundamentals.

Complaints included:

- *Repairs took too long*
- *Too long waiting for repairs to start*
- *Confusion over contact arrangements*
- *Lack of communication*
- *Issues with appointments*

Our short-notice inspection highlighted that the benefits of a partnership arrangements with one of our repairs contractors were only reaching part of our stock. Outside of this contracting, arrangements were fragmented and inconsistent. We knew we needed to define a new service, choose new contractors and restructure our Property Services Team. We feel that we have been innovative in each of these, and while some organisations might undertake one task, we needed all three to dovetail. Our new service went live on December 1 2008.

How the innovation evolved

From the moment of selection, innovation evolved. We established a single project group, Project Twocan, including both new contractors and they immediately showed flexibility in working together – especially when we needed gas servicing and repairs to go live a month earlier than planned. Working together helped us to share our strengths, for example, Great Places is providing induction training with our diversity officer for operatives. Our coordinators spent time in contractors' call centres and out on the road with operatives – all part of fully understanding the service.

We set up a secure portal site on our intranet that we and the contractors use to post information – improving communication and saving paper.

The coordinators' role has developed. They are fully mobile and were involved in selecting IT kit – tablets and 3G cards. This enables them to work anywhere – in our office, at home, alongside our housing teams, and go online when with tenants. On Tuesdays, everyone is at the office for a team meeting. This is a great chance to share ideas and information. Training has covered all aspects of the role and we recently held a 'Women in Construction' workshop with our contractors which included hands on plumbing, tiling and plastering together with inspirational women speakers from construction.

Our ICT systems are now interfaced with contractor systems – meaning no invoices, which cuts down on admin. Our staff can access contractors' systems to see contact history with residents, eliminating old school conversations along the lines of: "He said this but she said that."

How we expect it to grow

The first year of the project has focused on getting the service that residents specified, and developing the coordinators and their role. The second year will allow us to structure employment and training opportunities for tenants and residents, tie repairs and maintenance in more effectively with our investment work, and improve the sustainability of the service.

- *We will be running a local standards pilot with supported housing to provide appropriate and very reactive service for*

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*residents and staff
in our supported houses
schemes.*

- *We are developing a formal training and employment plan with our contractors to provide opportunities for residents and neighbourhoods. As well as trade trainees we have had two office based trainees in the first year.*
- *We are developing standardisation of materials – some are already agreed – particularly for environmental sustainability.*
- *Great Places housing services team is restructuring and we are working with them and contractors to maximise the opportunities for efficiency and service.*
- *We are reviewing the three handyperson/caretaker roles with a view to extending this aspect of the service.*
- *We are developing formally the measurement of additional jobs completed by an operative whilst on site.*

How we monitor the effectiveness of our service

We have recently gained Customer Service Excellence (CSE) accreditation, a brand-new government accreditation scheme to recognise excellent customer service. The assessor visited Property Services and this was a tool for monitoring whether we were meeting customer needs.

Property services have a dedicated officer from the Quality and Performance Team who monitors the performance of the contractors. Another benefit is that this resource offers a central and strategic steer to improving the service.

Tenants are very much a part of scrutinising the performance of the contractors. Great Places have introduced a Tenant Services Committee, which is a strategic governing body and monitors performance at a high level. Other tenant bodies such as tenant panels and tenant advisory groups also review performance information on our repairs service. We are training tenant inspectors to look at aspects of our work, especially where we have a concern or where we have made a change. This work will start with void inspections.

Key performance indicators were developed to provide

emphasis on the priorities of the service as developed with tenants. These include:

- *Jobs done on time*
- *Jobs completed in one visit*
- *Customer satisfaction*
- *Value for money*
- *Appointments made and kept*
- *Telephone calls answered promptly*

Validation of the figures is carried out on a regular basis to ensure that performance information is being collected accurately and in a consistent way. Partners share performance information with each other to promote healthy competition a sharing of good practice.

The CSE Assessor was impressed with the operations managers / contract managers group, particularly with how potential 'competitors' are working collaboratively, and figures are shared so everyone wants to want to work to their best performance.

Internal auditors pick up on any gaps in the performance monitoring framework and were one of the advisors in our development of the KPI validation process.

The organisation has also signed up to carry out peer reviews which will act like an inspection for our services, including property services. The new PSCs have much more of a monitoring role than the surveyors so that managers' time can be spent on more strategic matters.

The Customer Involvement Co-ordinator monitors complaints and comments on satisfaction cards to see any patterns that need to be addressed and can trigger improvement work.



David Mawson of Connaught, Stephen Porter and Maggie Shannon of Great Places, and Bob Taylor of KHT at the contract signing

Benefits to the client, the contractor, the residents and neighbourhood

Our new group wide repairs service was launched less than twelve months ago and already we are seeing the benefits of these changes in improved customer satisfaction as a consequence of a more efficient repair service – in November 2009 satisfaction was rated at 99.1% compared with 98.7% in May 2009.

Residents have told us they are happy with the new service provided by the partnering contractors. Recently we organised seven different events across the group and invited residents to drop in and chat directly with the contractor who provide the repairs service in their area, while raising money for MacMillan Cancer Support.

We wanted to offer Great Places residents the opportunity to meet with their contractor to build positive relationship and share their experiences both good and bad. The feedback from these events was that the residents appreciated meeting their contractor and having the chance to talk to them. The events were also held in high regard by the partnering contractors and we plan to offer more opportunities to residents to meet directly with their contractor.

The partnering contractors agreed to include joint branding of vehicles giving a strong presence of Great Places Housing Group in the have areas we work, which shows to residents the corporate approach and the commitment of the partnering contractors to this arrangement. The new Property Services Co-ordinator role was awarded a 'Tenants' Award' earlier this year in acknowledgement of the good work they have done as well as the support offered to tenants during the mobilisation period of the partnering contract.

Residents have told us there has been an improvement in the communications with the new contractor as a result of there being a single point of contact as well as the role of Property Services Co-ordinator.

The new service has improved target times and more repairs jobs have been completed within target for no extra cost giving value for money and improving customer satisfaction. We now have emergency response times as four hours, urgent jobs as three working days and routine jobs as ffteen working days.



Construction trainees Sarah Hall and Tony Winstanley, who took part in Great Places' established STEP1 scheme, which will provide inspiration and knowhow for our property services initiative, now being set up



Wider community benefits

We have three environmental projects about to start, all of which will incorporate training opportunities for local residents.

We use two schemes that recycle furniture from void properties. These schemes provide free/cheap furniture for people living in the areas, as well as reducing the amount of landfill (and reducing our void costs!). We are developing a scheme for providing loft insulation in void properties. This will be run by Big Life and provide opportunities for people entering/re-entering the employed sector.

We are also developing a scheme that will allow residents to dispose of electrical items for free. This will utilise the arrangements that one of our contractors has set up with an environmental practice.

We intend to take on two trainees through the Future Jobs Fund and a modern apprentice, both based in the property services team, in addition to the existing trainee.

We built in the opportunity for our existing small black minority ethnic contractors to continue working and develop their business. This was done through the contractual right to nominate subcontractors, though this was

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not necessary and one BME contractor has become a significant part of the new service.

The furniture re-use, loft insulation and electrical items disposal schemes discussed above all directly contribute to improved environmental sustainability. One of the BME contractors has completed over £100,000 worth of voids works in the first six months of the contract.

Financial costs and cashable benefits

The direct financial costs of developing the service were minimal – mainly solicitor's contract development costs and travel/tenants' expenses. The project did require a significant amount of staff time, but this has more than paid for itself in the outcomes.

Savings arise from a number of areas.

- *By using fewer contractors we gain economies of scale – the average job cost is less than previously.*
- *By having fewer contractors we are able to get more out of the time managers spend running the contracts – this has enabled us to provide better services for tenants and more initiatives.*
- *Our contractors do many of the pre-inspections and all void pre-inspections (up to an agreed limit). This saves duplication and enables us to complete processes more quickly.*
- *Improved times in void repairs have been achieved through focusing the contractors resources, and this has reduced rent loss.*
- *We have been able to piggyback initiatives on to the service, for example the completion of inspections related to scalding risk from immersion heaters.*
- *Access for gas servicing is better than it has ever been at 99.8% compliance.*
- *We are offering longer call centre opening hours to tenants, for the same cost as previously.*
- *We have reduced invoices from 30,000 per year to fewer than 50.*

- *There are overall savings to the partnerships of contractors being based in our offices – less travel, fewer phone calls and reduced office costs generally.*

- *Dealing with TUPE issues separately to tender price.*

We have a KPI for value for money and calculate average job costs. We compare our previous call handling costs to those with the contractors.

We estimate that processing an invoice costs a minimum of £20, so we have saved at least £0.5m per year. Some of this is reflected in less staff in our finance team, some of this is enabling property services staff to do other things.

Our auditors are accountants and spend 5-10 days per year checking and validating what we do in property services. We appointed specialist auditors to verify value for money with the existing contractor which is on a cost plus basis. We use specialist technical consultants to audit gas and other servicing.

We agreed rates for three years in the contract, allowing each party to have certainty of costs, creating efficient business planning.

Using a schedule of rates for the first year enables contractors to have a degree of certainty about margin. We are moving from schedule of rates to average job cost with a goal of average per property per year cost. This will give both parties increased certainty about cost and revenue, now that there is good information to go forward with.



Residents Ugur, Lesley and their children Adil and Nezile at Longridge, Knutsford

How other organisations could replicate our example

Other housing associations without Direct Labour Organisation (DLO) could replicate our system. Great Places is a dynamic organisation that can make changes quickly without excessive bureaucracy, and whose employees are generally have confidence in its aims. Early buy-in from staff to the vision was critical.

Great Places has very dispersed and diverse tenancies. Most organisations would find the changes easier as they are unlikely to have this challenge

The success of these changes could be followed by other organisations but it requires staff who are customer focused and ready to embrace change. Organisations would need to be prepared to think out of the box for example appointing frontline staff who have not worked in housing or repairs before.

Establishing a project team, including other parts of the business, and managing the project effectively is important. Our project manager was a non-property services person, since we thought it important that property services staff were delivering elements of the project within the manager's overview.

Key to our success was communication, communication, communication. No communication means no buy-in. We had a formal communication network and all stakeholders were kept informed and up to date throughout the process.

If we went through the process again, we might rethink a pre-Christmas launch – at a cold time of year that sees an influx of problems with heating, which put a considerable strain on the fledgling service. Changes could also be staged and better environmental indicators could be built into the brief.

In conclusion

In conclusion, Great Places is extremely proud of its carefully planned, customer-focused, streamlined and flexible repairs service. The group now has a robust structure, not just to make sure repairs get done – and quickly – but to see that tenants are happy and satisfied, and are properly consulted on what happens when.

Over and above this, our burgeoning projects to create employment and increase environmental benefits and sustainability, make our service a unique feat of innovation, application and operation.



Young Oldham resident Daniel Whatmough playing out on his street



Mark Shawcross, left, of Great Places, and Phil Lawrence of KHT, with residents at a property services coffee morning for MacMillan

Employee case study

Rachel Nolan, gas servicing coordinator

As the co-ordinator of gas servicing for the whole of Great Places Housing Group, property services officer Rachel Nolan holds one of the most vital and responsible roles in the organisation.

She ensures that all 9,500 properties with gas hold valid gas safety certificates – no matter how challenging the circumstances of engineers gaining access to carry out this essential, potentially life-saving task.

A gas explosion, or carbon monoxide poisoning caused by a faulty appliance, could justifiably land our directors in prison.

Whereas in most people's jobs, slip-ups or oversights could mean a late payment or a missed appointment, in Rachel's it could have much graver circumstances. She is trusted to meet this challenge and never ceases to impress senior management.

Rachel, pictured right winning last year's employee of the year award for property services, joined the organisation in 2000 as a housing administrative officer at her local Bolton office.

Her highly methodical and efficient working style in the field of lettings and service charges marked her out as a rising star straight away and she was asked to take on responsibility for gas servicing in some areas of the group.

Straight away, she set about devising a new Excel-based system for managing the mammoth task and made the job her own.

Over the past couple of years, she has grown and flourished in the role, and now handles gas servicing for the whole of Great Places, under the streamlined system she set up and pioneered.

Now, she derives such satisfaction from the role that she says she wouldn't want to do any other job. Despite its complexities, she also manages to brief colleagues to make sure things run smoothly when she is away. The weekly reports she files to managers and directors often show

performance well above targets set out for housing associations.

Guidelines call for 95% of homes to hold valid certificates. Thanks to Rachel, Great Places generally runs at 99%.

As her role expanded, Rachel pinpointed pockets of stock across the group where more certificates were outstanding and took appropriate action, bringing standards up to a uniform level in a system that now seamlessly encompasses the stock of three member housing associations.

Rachel takes care of a rolling programme of properties nearing certificate expiry – 1,400 every month, as the group aims to service each property every 10 months, though certificates last a year.

She works with the group's four current contractors to send out letters to residents suggesting dates and times for servicing, and follow-up letters if tenants are not at home on an engineer's first visit. After two unsuccessful visits, a strongly-worded solicitor's letter is necessary, threatening court action and prison if tenants fail to grant access.

These letters sometimes prompt angry or abusive phone calls, which Rachel always deals with professionally and courteously. Though she arranges for 500 to 1,000 solicitors' letters to be sent to tenants every year, less than 50 cases get to court – another result of her good work.

Rachel maintains good relationships with our servicing contractors and our solicitors, Whitehead.

One of her managers, Melanie Kilroy, describes Rachel as warm, emotional and passionate in her work, as well as efficient and methodical, adding: "She has a real fire-in-the-belly approach and



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she always
focused, doing everything to the
best of her ability."

Being 'in the middle' between residents and contractors also requires Rachel to be a great diplomat and mediator. She is firm and authoritative when she needs to be, for example, when certificates completed by hand by engineers do not meet her high standards – if an address is spelt wrong, or a date missing – she sends them back and asks for them to be redone.

Rachel knows that for Great Places to maintain its integrity and good reputation, certificates must be 100% correct – for residents' peace of mind and also in the event of certificates

being called into scrutiny.

Director of performance and innovation, Maggie Shannon, says: "We know we can call on Rachel to check anything out for us, and she'll have the answer. She is so organised. For example, a few weeks ago there was a serious fire at one of our houses in Oldham. In any instance like that, gas safety certificates are checked as part of the investigation.

"We weren't worried because we knew that, thanks to her, it would almost certainly have a certificate. Rachel was able to confirm that this was the case, straight away."

Maggie continues: "Rachel embodies the spirit of our organisation and sets a fabulous example for all of us."

Stock in Manchester, Blackpool, Sheffield, Stoke and Bury, showing some of the different house and apartment types requiring repairs and maintenance

