

Appendix 1



Resident Scrutiny Panel Report June 2015

Day to Day Repairs at Town & Country Housing

Review by the Town & Country Housing Group Resident Scrutiny Panel

Panel Members involved: Cicilia Bannister, Jennifer Blackburn, Lucy Cook, Laura Dullar, Michelle Kerwin, Emma Lovell, Len Lewis, Francesca O'Neill, Patrick Roche, and Barbara Twiss

Executive Summary

The Resident Scrutiny Panel (RSP) is pleased to present the outcomes of its review of the Day to Day (responsive) Repairs Service to the Town & Country Board. Our review has taken a detailed look at Town & Country Housing Group's (TCHG's) day to day repairs service focussing on the main contractors, Countrywise & Mears, and including their interaction with and impact upon TCHG staff. We have also carried out a limited review of Swale Heating and a review of the in-house handyman service currently available to TCHG residents in sheltered schemes.

The review took place over a period from late October 2014 to May 2015. The review identified a number of clear themes which run through the recommendations we are making for service improvements. These themes focus on: communication; accountability; appointments; IT systems; the role of Neighbourhood Housing Managers in the repairs service and the need to adopt a more joined up approach to the repairs service.

During the course of the review we have seen some changes to the way the service is delivered particularly by Countrywise repairs; most notably a change of senior management and the introduction, in April, of the PDA (handheld computer) system for operatives. Whilst it is too early to assess the long term impact of these changes the panel hope that they will bring positive improvements.

Changes have also been made as a result of TCHG's internal repairs review which, although concluded in September 2014, continues to implement change via the Repairs Action Plan, overseen by the Repairs Continuous Improvement Group. Kevin Thorne, Head of Contracts and Compliance, who joined TCHG in April 2014, has also brought a new approach to managing and monitoring the service.

We are pleased to note that recent performance information shows a continuing improvement in customer satisfaction with the repairs service (although some caution should be applied as the method of measuring satisfaction has changed).

We are confident that our recommendations can contribute towards continuous improvement. Our recommendations focus on improving processes, systems and communication and aim to further improve customer satisfaction with day to day repairs whilst ensuring flexible, cost effective services.

1. Introduction

The RSP was set up by TCHG in October 2013; our first annual scrutiny review programme began in April 2014. This is the 2nd review we have completed as part of that programme. We have applied the scrutiny skills and knowledge developed in the first review and have welcomed three new members to the panel during the course of the review; they have brought new skills and perspectives to the review process.

2. Background information:

The review took place between October 2014 & May 2015. We chose to review repairs because it is the Town & Country Housing service that is most important to residents; an effective repairs service is vital for customer satisfaction and maintaining well kept properties.

Customer insight (such as complaints and satisfaction surveys) & Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) showed us that although repairs performance is generally improving there are still some areas of dissatisfaction.

Issues of concern included:

- Resident satisfaction with the repairs services
 - Satisfaction is improving – but still below average for the sector
- Examples of poor communication
- An apparent lack of accountability when things go wrong
- Whether service levels are consistent across our contractors yet flexible enough to meet residents' diverse needs

Repairs are a big area of expenditure. TCHG's 2014/15 budget for responsive repairs was over £4.5 million (£4,643,000). We are therefore keen to ensure that the service is as efficient and cost effective as it can be and that we are adding value where possible.

The review was timed to take place following the completion of TCHG's internal repairs review

2.1 Scope of review

We initially considered all aspects of TCHG's repairs service, but needed to limit the scope of the review to make it manageable and be able to reach meaningful recommendations. At the end of October we met with Kevin Thorne, the Head of Contracts & Compliance and Richard Brothers, the Asset Investment Programme

Manager. After considering their presentations (along with performance information detailed below and other customer insight) we decided to concentrate on the day to day repairs service. It should be noted however, that it is not possible to separate this service entirely from the asset investment service (which delivers the planned and cyclical maintenance programme) and some of our recommendations reflect this.

We have excluded the damp & mould process from this review. We recognise that damp and mould is an area of concern for residents and generates a comparatively high level of repairs queries and complaints (an analysis of all complaints from January – October 2014 showed that Damp and Mould was the single most complained about issue, and 18% of all comments in the 2013 STAR survey related to Damp & Mould). In November we met with Dennis Viljoen, Procurement Manager, who was the lead officer for TCHG's internal repairs review. In discussing outcomes of that review we became aware that TCHG had recognised that they need to change the way they deal with reports of damp & mould. TCHG intend to adopt a more customer focussed approach to the issue, illustrated by the recent employment of a technical officer whose role will be improving and delivering TCHG's approach to damp, mould and condensation issues. We therefore felt that until this new approach has had time to 'bed in' the scrutiny panel should adopt a purely monitoring role in relation to damp and mould issues.

2.2 Specific areas for investigation

To facilitate the review the RSP wanted to fully understand:

- The repairs process from the point of reporting a repair to it being completed to the residents' satisfaction
- The appointment system and expectations around time taken to complete day to day repairs against actual time taken to complete the repair
- Communication to the resident throughout the process
- How internal communication impacts on effective delivery of the service (including communication between day to day repairs and the planned maintenance teams TCHG & contractors and between different contractors)
- Officer/team responsibilities including the role of the NHM in repairs
- Customer satisfaction and how it is measured
- Service standards - What information is provided to residents and how this is communicated?
- Consistency of service across different contractors
- Repairs/property information held by TCHG and how this is shared internally and with residents
- Supervision of repairs – quality control
- Information given at sign-up –e.g. component replacement schedule, location of stop cocks, heating instruction manuals, expected property & decoration standards

2.3 Performance Information

The following information was used to inform the choice of topic and inform our investigations.

2.3i) STAR survey:

The 2013 STAR survey included a 'Key Driver Analysis' to identify those services that are important in driving customers' satisfaction with our services. This analysis identified that the following areas were considered the most important by customers:

- How Enquiries are Handled
- Repairs
- Information and Involvement

Getting these things right is vital to delivering an effective repairs service.

2.3ii) Key Performance Information (KPIs)

The 2013 STAR survey showed that satisfaction with the way TCHG deal with repairs and maintenance stood at 69%, only a 1% improvement on the 68% score in the 2010 STAR survey. On average other housing providers were achieving a score of 76% so there was clearly room for improvement. Whilst the current direction of travel is positive, overall satisfaction with repairs currently stands at 72% (YTD March – data from all satisfaction surveys) which is third quartile. Median(average) is 75.5% and top quartile is 81.8%

HouseMark benchmarking results for the year 2013/14 show satisfaction at 69.05%, putting TCHG in the third quartile.

Current performance (March 2015) stands at 94% for overall repair satisfaction, (this is a survey of recent repair completions) however measurement has recently changed from a 5 scale measurement to a yes/no option; this appears to have had a positive impact on performance results. Median (average) in the sector is 90.95% and top quartile is 95.6%. We would ultimately like to see TCHG delivering top quartile performance. It should be noted that the end of year performance figure for 2014/15 was 88%, a decrease of 1% on 2013/14 and 2% below the 90% target for 2014/15.

2.4 Aims of the review

The aims of our review were:

- To increase customer satisfaction
- To improve communication with residents about the repairs process
- To ensure clear processes
- To ensure a consistent yet flexible service
- To ensure that services are value for money and as cost effective as possible

3. Methodology

We adopted a structured process to carrying out the review, starting with selection and scoping of the specific area of repairs to be reviewed, as described above.

3.1 Desk Top Review

This was the first phase of the review once the scope had been agreed. During the desk top review we looked at documents and on-line information to give us a detailed overview of TCHG's day to day repairs processes and performance information. We also carried out benchmarking and investigated good practice by other housing providers. The initial findings from the desk top review then formed the basis for the reality check phase of the review.

3.2 Reality Checks

This phase of the review involved meeting with both TCHG staff and contractors.

Activities included:

- Several meetings with Countrywise Repairs staff including managers, call handlers and repairs operatives and observations of the repairs helpdesk and the new PDA system
- A visit to Mear's local office, meeting with their Regional Technical Manager and operational staff
- Discussion with an observations of the TCHG Customer Service Officers who carry out the repairs satisfaction surveys
- Meetings with the TCHG surveyor, Neighbourhood Housing Managers (NHMs) and the complaints team

Both the East and West Kent Repairs Panels were involved in the reality checks. The East Kent Repairs panel interviewed NHMs about their role in relation to repairs and the West Kent panel carried out a review of the Handyman Service. We are grateful for the help of the repairs panels. The work they carried out assisted with the review and contributed to the final recommendations made.

We are also very grateful to all the staff members involved in the reality checks. We have found that staff are always happy to talk about their work and everyone we spoke to was very open with us and willing to discuss any perceived problems and areas for improvement. This includes all the contractors we met with; they were very open and willing to work with us to continually improve the service for all customers.

A full list of information sources and reality check activities is provided at appendix 2.

3.4 Resident Surveys

We also conducted a resident survey using this as the launch topic for Customer Net, the new internet group launched by the Customer engagement team to get occasional feedback on services from a wide group of residents

The on-line survey asked if residents had had a repair carried out in the last 6 months and if so whether they were satisfied with the repairs process. There were 66 responses to the survey which we ran for two weeks in March. Of the respondents 27% had not requested a repair in the last 6 months. Of those who had had a repair carried out 58% were satisfied, 40% were dissatisfied and 2% did not state whether they were satisfied. Whilst we acknowledge that residents who have had an issue with the service might be more inclined to respond to this kind of survey, comments indicated that the major areas of dissatisfaction were around poor communication, contractors' failure to keep appointments and the length of time taken to complete repairs. These themes mirror and support the overall findings of the review.

It should also be noted that the West Kent Repairs Panel review of the handyman service involved face to face surveys with residents at sheltered schemes and a total of 58 residents from seven schemes inputted into this part of the review.

4. Findings and Conclusions

The key findings of our investigations are:

- **Accountability**

We have found that complaints and expressions of dissatisfaction often point to an issue of lack of accountability with no one clearly taking responsibility for ongoing issues. Our investigations show that tenants do not always have a clear point of contact for resolving complaints issues or receiving information about ongoing repairs, particularly where these have been passed from one team to another. We have concluded that tenants need named officers or named teams within TCHG and their contractors; so they know who to liaise with when things go wrong. There also needs to be a clearer process, outlining staff/contractor responsibilities, allowing issues to be escalated where a repair has gone wrong or is not completed. Complaints, satisfaction data and our on-line survey of residents show that the current systems can leave residents feeling ignored and therefore not valued as customers.

- **Communication**

Effective communication is absolutely essential to delivering the excellent repairs service that both TCHG and its residents aspire to. We have found that when the service fails there are frequently issues of poor communication. This applies to communication about processes, communication between contractors and TCHG, communication internally within TCHG and most importantly communication with the residents.

- **IT systems**

There are several different systems in use (Lion, Genero, Integrator, Swale, Mears) which either have no interface with each other or the exchange of information between the systems is limited. In order to deliver a first class repairs service all parties involved need accurate information on every screen. There is a need to start building up holistic property information (see below) and make sure it is shared as appropriate.

We are concerned that Countrywise is not included in the current roll out of the CRM project as we believe that this will lead to gaps in information about tenancies and properties; the very issue that CRM is intended to overcome.

- **Neighbourhood Housing Manager's (NHM) role in the Repairs Service**

At present customers often rely on the NHM as the point of contact for repairs, especially when things go wrong or communication has broken down. We have concluded that the NHMs' job description needs to be reviewed and their agreed role needs to be clearly defined, applied consistently (or with agreed exceptions for example around giving additional support to more vulnerable tenants) and communicated to residents and contractors. There are sometimes mixed messages from Countrywise and TCHG with residents being told to involve their NHM in certain repair issues (often where there is

discussion about whether something is tenant or TCHG responsibility). Everyone working on behalf of TCHG needs to give a consistent message about when NHMs should be involved in the repairs process.

- **Lack of joined up approach to maintaining properties/ gaps in property information**

TGCH's Contacts and Compliance (who oversee the day to day repairs contracts) and Asset Investment teams are separate, sitting in different directorates and as a result there is evidence that they sometimes appear not to communicate effectively. The teams have different priorities and separate budgets. This can lead to problems for tenants when repairs are handed from one team to the other, for example there is no evidence of agreed processes for who is responsible for communicating decisions to residents when works are passed between the teams. We would like consideration to be given as to whether the current structure should be reviewed.

Ultimately we would like to see an approach where well maintained properties and a wisely applied planned repairs programme leads to fewer day to day repairs and cost savings.

Better information is needed for both residents and contractors about when TCHG's planned and cyclical repairs will take place.

- **Appointments**

We evidenced examples of both contractors and residents failing to keep appointments, there is also an issue with 'follow on' appointments, with some examples of works not being completed for several months or even years or nothing happening after an initial inspection.

The emergency/appointed appointments system is not clearly understood by some residents and staff. We have found that residents' expectations are sometimes not well managed about the timescales in which they can expect a repair to be completed. There is no 'backstop' – no defined period in which residents can expect a repair to happen.

Our investigations showed that information passed to the operative could sometimes be improved to make it easier for them to complete the job at the first visit.

- **Other Issues Investigated**

Right First time – Contractor and resident definitions of first time fix can differ and evidence shows that it may be more useful to give residents more comprehensive, realistic, information about the likely length and number of repair visits needed at the point of reporting a repair.

Handyman Service – The West Kent Repairs panel conducted this part of the review and evidenced that there is a need to clarify the remit and scope of the handyman role;

clearly advertising how to access the service and what it provides, to those residents who are currently eligible to receive it. We are also recommending a review to establish if a cost effective method can be found to extend the service to older and vulnerable residents who do not live in sheltered schemes.

Reporting & Monitoring - As part of the ongoing action plan resulting from this review the RSP would like to actively monitor progress of

- Improved performance reporting from Swale
- Implementation of the PDA system by Countrywise Repairs and how this impacts on service provision and customer satisfaction
- Damp and Mould – The RSP would like to monitor the impact of TCHG’s revised approach to dealing with this issue including the effectiveness of the new technical officer role.

Training – We would like to see the implementation of a formal training programme for Countrywise call handlers and operatives for identifying and dealing with vulnerable tenants and a clear process for reporting concerns.

5. Recommendations

We have made a total of 32 recommendations divided into the ten themes outlined above. Our recommendations focus on improving processes, systems and both internal and external communication and aim to further improve the repairs service and therefore, customer satisfaction, whilst ensuring flexible but consistently good services which are value for money

Many of the recommendations require minor process changes or improved documentation which we believe could be implemented reasonably easily and quickly, if agreed. However we recognise that other recommendations will have significant impact on staff or in terms of costs or other resources. Where this is the case we have asked for a review of the financial viability of our proposal rather than an immediate definitive response to the recommendation.

Our recommendations are attached at Appendix 1 of this report.

6. Way Forward/Next Steps

As required by the Scrutiny Panel Constitution this report has been included on the agenda of the next available meeting of the Board following its completion (June 2015). Before the report was submitted to the Board it has been submitted to the appropriate Heads of Service for comment. This report has been discussed with Kevin Thorne, Head of Contracts and Compliance.

We met with Kevin on 21st May after sending him the draft recommendations for consideration. The recommendations have also been considered by The Executive Management Team who have added to the management response. This process ensures that management are either supportive of our recommendations or have a response ready for the Board to consider. The managers’ responses have been included

in the Management Response column of the recommendations table at appendix 1.

We request that the Board considers our recommendations and provides a formal response, detailing the process by which accepted recommendations will be implemented. The Resident Scrutiny Panel Constitution states that “Where recommendations are agreed by the Board an action plan will be implemented by the Head of Service, who will provide the RSP with an update on progress every 6 months. Where the Board does not agree with any of the RSP’s recommendations, the reasons will be explained in the response to the RSP.”

Based on our discussions with the Head of Contracts & Compliance we suggest that the existing Repairs Continuous Improvement Group, which includes representatives from Contracts & Compliance, Countrywise Repairs & Asset Investment, is an ideal vehicle for monitoring the implementation of the majority of the agreed recommendations and that the Board considers delegating this responsibility to that group.

Agreed recommendations and progress against these will be publicised to residents, staff and other stakeholders. We are in discussion with Rachel Branson, PR & Communications Manager, about innovative ways to do this in order to reach the widest possible audience.

We would like to reiterate our thanks to all the staff, repairs panel members and other residents who assisted us with the review.

Appendices

Appendix 1 – Recommendations

Appendix 2 – Information Sources and Scrutiny Activities