

Achieving Best Value In the Repairs Service

A Report by Newcastle Tenants Federation, June 2000

Introduction

This report sets out the Federation's vision of the way the repairs service in Newcastle should be developed and improved to meet the needs of tenants, now and in the future. It is based on years of work discussing the repairs service with tenants representatives throughout the city. It sets out the main principles upon which we believe the service should be based and the key elements of the service that tenants want.

We are submitting this to the council's best value review team in the belief that it has an important contribution to make to achieving best value. We see this best value review as an opportunity to take a root and branch look at the service and redefine how it should be delivered to meet the needs of today's tenants.

To supplement our existing knowledge of tenants views we have carried out specific consultation exercises with tenants and tenants groups over the last few weeks. These include three open meetings, publishing a special edition of our newsletter 'Tenants News' and carrying out a survey of tenants views and ideas for improvements. The outcome of these consultations are detailed in appendices 1 & 2.

Key Principles

- **The housing management context is relevant to defining the kind of people focussed repairs service tenants want:**

The Federation and tenants associations have long argued for a housing management service which is delivered as part of a comprehensive package of services to estates. This means that housing managers must necessarily work closely with a range of other service providers in order to be effective.

The starting point of the service has to be understanding the needs of the people receiving it. Council tenants have amongst their number some of the most vulnerable members of the community in terms of age, poverty, disability and poor health. Services have to be shaped to meet their needs and co-ordination with a range of other services such as health, social services, youth services and education becomes essential.

Newcastle is taking steps towards delivering this kind of housing management service through its reorganisation of the housing department into the community & housing directorate, which aims to give a broader community focus to housing services. Placing people within the same directorate and offices will not in itself guarantee the changes we seek. A significant change in culture needs to take place if youth workers, community workers and housing officers are to successfully work together to find joined up solutions to problems. This co-ordinated way of working also needs to extend to other service providers both within and outside the council who will also need to be involved.

The point we want to emphasise is that we are looking for a new approach to housing management within which our vision for the repairs service must be seen.

- **The repairs service delivered as an integral part of this housing management service**

Everyone involved with the repairs needs to see themselves as delivering a service which is an integral part of this new approach to housing management delivered to tenants. Repair workers can have more contact with tenants than any other council officer, and are certainly more likely than anyone else, to be regularly going in to tenants homes. They should be encouraged to pick up and refer on any wider issue or problems they come across in the course of their work. As an example, a repair worker carrying out a repair for an elderly person notices from the condition of the flat that the person is not coping and passes this information on to the housing officers to check out.

- **Local teams, known to, and with a knowledge of, the communities in which they work**

If staff are going to be able to work in this way they need to know and be known in the communities in which they work. Local teams should therefore be established wherever possible so that knowledge and expertise can be developed. We know that this happens to some extent at the moment but think that it should be developed further.

- **A streamlined process**

The client contractor split is increasingly irrelevant to our vision for the service. A fundamental prerequisite of providing best value to tenants we feel must be to get rid of old divisions and provide a seamless service from beginning to end.

The bureaucracy of the current system needs to be tackled and the system made more flexible to meet tenants needs.

- **An accountable service**

The repairs service needs to be more transparent and accountable to tenants. Clear service standards which are consistently applied are crucial. Feedback from tenants needs to be promoted and encouraged as way of ensuring continuous improvement.

Key Elements of an improved repairs service

- **An appointment system for all but emergency repairs**

Our feedback from tenants groups show us that the lack of an appointment system is one of the most frustrating aspects of the current system. It wastes everyone's time and money and leaves tenants facing further delays in getting work done. The cost to the council and tenants, of workers calling when tenants are not in is enormous. The appointment system therefore needs to be extended, as a matter of urgency, so that most repairs are covered in the near future.

- **A choice of reporting methods**

There should continue to be a choice of ways of reporting a repair. Although reporting by telephone will be the most convenient way for a lot of tenants, reporting repairs in person should still be an option for people who cannot, or choose not to use the phone. Ways of developing these choices further, for example by offering the facility to report repairs through digital TV or email, should be explored.

- **Highly trained staff taking reports**

Whichever reporting method is used the skills of the person taking the request are very important. They should have high standard of communication and customer care skills and an ability to pick up when a repair problem might be a symptom of a wider housing problem, for example, a sign of harassment which needs to be flagged up with local housing managers.

They should also have a degree of technical understanding about housing repair issues so that accurate reports of repairs are made wherever possible.

In light of the above we think there is a need to review current reporting arrangements and consider what changes are needed to bring about improvements.

- **Receipts**

Tenants should always be given a reference number and details of when the work will be carried out whichever method they use to report the repair. In spite of it being current policy to issue receipts to anyone reporting a repair in person the feedback we get from tenants indicates that this does not always happen.

- **Extending the opportunity to report repairs**

The hours during which repairs can be reported, in person or by phone, should be extended. Housing offices should not close for lunch and should open at least one evening per week.

- **Evaluating the pre inspection process**

The pre inspection process needs to be evaluated as it is a cause of significant discontent amongst tenants. It is frequently seen as an extra tier of bureaucracy which contributes to delays. In general, we think that most repairs should be reported straight through to depots to reduce the number of people involved in carrying out each repair.

- **A flexible, less bureaucratic service**

All repairs staff need to be able to respond flexibly to repair requests. We feel strongly that bonus schemes militate against providing the type of people centred the service we want to see, focussing as they do on the particular job reported, rather than the persons actual repair needs. Workers should have the flexibility to be able to carry out other jobs that they realise need doing once they visit the property, rather than the tenant having to report these repairs separately.

- **Multi skilled workers**

If tenants are to receive the flexible service they want we think there has to be a change in the way repairs work is organised. We have to work towards some multi skilled teams who can carry out multi trade jobs in one visit. Jobs for which multi skilled working is not appropriate need to be co-ordinated so that all work is completed in one visit wherever possible.

- **Moving towards planned maintenance**

There should be a move towards more planned maintenance, which we believe will deliver a more effective service to tenants as well as save money.

- **Repairing Empty Properties**

The proper repair of properties before a tenant moves in is vital to set a tenancy off on the right footing and saves time and money.

Tighter monitoring of the condition of empty properties before a tenant moves in is needed. Clear information about the standard a property should be in before a tenancy begins should also be given to tenants. All parties, including the prospective tenant, should sign to say that these standards have been reached before the tenant moves in.

- **Improving communication**

Poor communication within the council and between the council and tenants is costly and leads to delays. Problems of workers arriving when tenants are not in and workers arriving with the wrong tools are symptoms of this. We believe that the way the current system is organised gives rise to communication problems simply because there are too many links in the chain of responsibility for repairs.

We think that the system needs to be reviewed with this in mind. As part of this review, consideration should be given to issuing repairs workers with mobile phones so that they can communicate more easily with the housing office, the depot and tenants.

- **Improving the quality of work**

There remains significant dissatisfaction with the quality of work carried out. Tenants attribute various reasons for this including not enough time being allowed to complete jobs; an attitude that the tenant is not paying directly for the work and so doesn't have to be provided with a high quality service; a feeling that there is not enough supervision of workers and the perception that the whole system is driven by keeping costs down rather than providing high quality work.

What is clear is that steps need to be taken to increase tenants confidence in the service by improving standards. There should be greater publicity about tenants rights and the standards they should expect and greater supervision to check that these are being delivered.

- **Improving post inspection**

One step towards improving the standard of the repairs service is to improve the post inspection of repairs and the monitoring of tenant satisfaction. Our ideas include giving every tenant a pre paid postcard with some simple way for them to show whether or not they are satisfied with the repair. This card should be returned to the housing office and any sign of dissatisfaction should be followed up.

A more detailed questionnaire could be left with a percentage of households and a further sample of tenants could be phoned to see if they were happy with their repair. Any indication of dissatisfaction should be logged and followed up.

- **Being positive about complaints**

There needs to be a fundamental change in the council's attitude towards dealing with complaints. They should be viewed positively, as an opportunity to develop the service and tenants should be encouraged to complain if they are dissatisfied in any way. Information about how to complain should be positively promoted and could be included, for example on the back of repairs receipts.

All complaints and action taken, whether they are dealt with formally or informally, should be logged and monitored. The council also needs to regularly monitor and check out the effectiveness of the complaints procedure itself.

Summary of Issues raised at Federation open meetings held on May 18th & 27th & 28th June 2000

Customer Care:

Problems:

- Workers attitudes to tenants, both Cityworks and housing are not always what they should be and some staff are seen as unhelpful or rude
- Tenants don't feel they get the same standard of service that a home owner would expect to receive
- There is a need for more expertise from staff when taking repair reports

Ideas for improvements

- All staff need more training in communication skills and customer care
- Staff taking repairs should have more technical repairs knowledge
- Operatives should always show identity cards

Communication:

- Communication between housing and Cityworks is poor
- Wrong trades come out to do jobs, a waste of time and money.
- Workers attend when you've said you won't be in
- The computer system seems to be a problem as receipt scan still not always be given
- Lack of co-ordination of multi trade jobs

Ideas for improvement

- The appointment system should be extended and after hours appointments should be available
- Council should use the phone to contact people where they can
- Need to make sure that receipts are always given, even when the computer is 'down'
- The problems with the computer system need investigating
- Need to work towards a multi skilled workforce

Quality Control:

Problems:

- Poor quality of work means jobs have to be done again
- Mess is left after jobs
- Some material used are of poor quality or 'old fashioned'.

Ideas for improvements:

- Need to work out how to introduce greater quality control - every job should be checked, if not a percentage of jobs should be thoroughly checked
- A satisfaction card should be left with every tenant
- A questionnaire about the work should be left with a percentage of tenants
- Penalties should be enforced if work is overdue or of a poor standard
- Sub contractors need to work to the same service standards as the council. They should be closely monitored
- Council need to make sure their materials keep up with modern standards.

Complaints:

Problems:

- The complaints system doesn't work

Ideas for improvement:

- There should be greater publicity about tenants rights and the standards they should expect.
- Tenants need to be encouraged to complain and all complaints should be logged.

The way the system is organised:

Problems:

- Bonus scheme has adverse effect
- Cards are left through doors when tenants are in
- System is too bureaucratic, too many bosses
- The system is driven by controlling cost, not quality
- Lack of planned maintenance
- Disagreements between tenants and the council over how repairs are prioritised.
- Repairs service is not consistent across the city
- Length of time taken to carry out some repairs

Ideas for Improvements:

- The bonus scheme should be replaced with a more flexible system
- Whole system needs to be streamlined and more closely co-ordinated
- There needs to be a greater shift towards planned maintenance
- Need to reduce the number of people involved in each repair
- Need locally based services, teams of workers who take pride in their work

**NEWCASTLE TENANTS FEDERATION
Repairs Survey - Summary of Responses
June 2000**

122 Surveys were completed by 22 tenants and residents associations;

Coxlodge Tenants Association

St Anne's Tenants Association

Shaftoe and Ewart Tenants Association

Fourstones Tenants and Residents Association

Shieldfield Tower Blocks

Eastfield Action Group

Burnside Tenants and Residents Association

Gramol Tenants Association

Kenton Bar Tenants and Residents Association

Shipleigh Walk Tenants Association

Blakelaw 165 Tenants and Residents Association

Church Road Flats and Coronation Cottages Tenants Association

Cruddas Park High Flats Tenants Association

Mather Waverley Tenants Association

Daisy Hill Action Group

Throckley Leazes Tenants and Residents Group

Upper Delaval Tenants Association

Hareydene Tenants and Residents Association

Crudass Park Tower Blocks Tenants Association

Vale House Tenants Association

Vallum Court Tenants and Residents Association

Throckley Northside Tenants and Residents Association

Main Issues/Problems

Delays/slow response time	43
No specific appointments	32
Poor workmanship	22
Unhelpful attitude of repairs staff	18
Workers coming with incorrect tools/parts	16
Patch up repairs carried out often requiring follow up	16
Pre-inspections lead to delays	13
Insufficient time allocated to carry our work properly	8
Need for more post inspections	8
Poor communication between housing and Cityworks	8
Workers leaving mess	8
Poor quality materials	7
Lack of co-ordination of multi trade jobs	5
Cards put through door when tenants in	5
Receipts not given	5
Repairs left unfinished and never completed	5
Need for capital works rather than repairs	5
Bureaucratic, inflexible system	4
Inconsistent repairs decisions	3
Workmen without appropriate skills arriving then Leaving	2
Concerns about “out of hours” service	2

Ideas for improvement

Do more post inspections

More customer care training

Introduce an appointments system

Have technically qualified staff taking repairs

Use better quality workers

Depots to be able to contact tenant and make appointments

Reduce pre-inspections

Increase worker supervision

The whole repairs system needs reorganising

Introduce quicker response times

Employ multi-skilled workers

Give tenants an evaluation form to complete and return to Housing

Employ more staff

Introduce penalties if job not done on time

Use better quality materials

Introduce minimum quality standards for work

Improve communication channels between Housing and Cityworks

Carry out all repairs to void properties before letting

Improve the complaints system

Introduce less bureaucratic repairs system

Workers to explain problem to tenants and give advice about avoiding the problem happening again

Introduce more planned maintenance

Give tenants the same service as owner occupiers

Repairs to be reported to caretakers in tower blocks and then to depot

More selective use of contractors

Allow more time for repairs to be completed

Introduce greater flexibility into the system so that jobs not on the ticket can be carried out at one visit

There needs to be more accountability in the repairs service