

# Housing Practice

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## Repairs and maintenance

### In this issue...

**Where are we now?**

See page 2

**Getting the basics right  
- The Campaign**

See page 3

**What are the core elements  
of a good repairs service?**

See page 4

**What are the 'nice to haves'?**

See page 7



# Repairs and maintenance

A good repairs and maintenance service is one of the most important services provided by a landlord. Not only is it the service that affects the greatest proportion of tenants, it is also the service that is most highly valued and can have the greatest impact on tenants' quality of life.

A good repairs service will not only provide homes that are comfortable and places that people are happy to live in, but will also protect the condition of your stock and its value in the long term.

Getting it right involves:

- Responding to reported repairs, both in tenants' homes and in communal areas, at a time convenient to the tenant
- Fixing repairs in one visit wherever possible
- Providing a quality repair first time

- Delivering a customer focused response
- Delivering a service that provides value for money.

This edition of housing practice sets out some of the key principles that will help you to deliver an effective repairs and maintenance service.



## Why getting repairs and maintenance right is vital

- Research shows that how satisfied tenants are with their landlord overall is heavily influenced by their satisfaction with the quality of the repairs services they receive
- Landlords are more likely to receive complaints about their repairs service when it goes wrong than any other aspect of service delivery
- Social landlords in the UK spend around £9 billion per year on repairs and maintenance. Expenditure on repairs and maintenance represents a significant chunk of weekly rental income, so delivering a service that is effective but also offers value for money is essential. Given the size of expenditure on repairs and maintenance just a small efficiency can equate to substantial savings.

## Where are we now?

In recent years there have been massive changes to the way traditional repairs and maintenance services are delivered. Different contractor and partnering arrangements, advancements in new technologies and new procurement methods have all contributed to the transformation and improvement of repairs services delivered by many landlords to their tenants.

Typically, these changes have meant:

- More repairs completed by appointment
- More repairs being completed in one visit
- Improved access for customers to report repairs, including extended hours of service
- More intelligent use of technology.

However, repairs and maintenance remains the service most landlords receive the

largest number of complaints about and vast differences still exist between good and bad service providers.

### The Cinderella service?

Although repairs is the number one priority for tenants and is the area of biggest spend for landlords, strategically it is not always recognised as one of the highest priorities by every landlord. While core landlord functions involve the letting and maintenance of affordable homes and



income management, most social landlords choose, and in some circumstances are expected, to do much more.

The prioritisation of repairs and maintenance services requires buy-in at a senior level if it is not going to be overshadowed by other activities, such as development, regeneration or social investment activities. While social housing landlords absolutely have a vital role to play in these areas it is essential that it is not to the detriment of getting the basics right in the core services your tenants expect you to deliver.

#### Is there a skills gap?

The last few decades have brought about a decline in the progression of learning, either through structured courses or 'on the job' training such as apprenticeships. In many situations we have seen training for trades reduced to short courses.

At the same time there has been a reduction in the numbers of tradespersons moving into management roles, with senior management teams overwhelmingly from finance or housing management backgrounds. An increase in the amount of work being outsourced has also contributed to the skills vacuum in the sector, with little succession planning taking place in some organisations.

**'The 'skills gap' which exists within many repairs and maintenance areas is having an effect both on service delivery as well as financial resources, this is only set to worsen in the coming years.'**

*David Hellier, Associate, CIH Consultancy*

Organisations should be asking themselves:

- Is responsive repairs given sufficient strategic and operational priority?
- Do we have the right people, with the right skills and expertise, in the right jobs to effectively lead and manage our repairs and maintenance services both now and in the future?

## Getting the basics right – The campaign

CIH has joined forces with repairs and maintenance experts Mears in a campaign, 'Getting the basics right'. It is designed to focus landlords in England, and their tenants, on what is at the heart of an effective repairs service.

Between now and the CIH annual conference in Manchester next June, we will be engaging the sector in open discussion, to provoke debate and challenge the way the sector currently delivers repairs and maintenance services. As a result of this discussion we aim to identify the core principles and building blocks to delivering an effective repairs service, regardless of landlord size, landlord type and repairs service delivery arrangements (for example in-house DLO or via a contractor or partnering arrangements).

It is these **'core elements'** that we will be challenging the sector to focus on first in order to deliver an effective and efficient service that meets tenants' and landlords' needs.

We will also engage with professionals working in the sector and tenants' representative bodies to understand which elements of the repairs service might be considered as offering **'added value'**.

By clearly differentiating between the 'core' and 'added value' elements of an effective repairs service, landlords can make best use of limited resources by focussing first and foremost on the core services, and then on what tenants and landlords value most.

Ultimately the campaign will produce:

- A sector-owned and developed Responsive Repairs Charter. This will be a set of commitments that landlords sign up to on a voluntary basis, focused on the core elements of an effective repairs service
- A range of practical guidance to support landlords to meet the commitments set out in the Charter.

Although the campaign is focused on England, the principles that underpin an effective service are likely to be the same wherever your organisation is based, and the examples of good practice identified could be replicated anywhere.

**'In short - this campaign is about providing support to landlords and tenants to deliver what they value most in a repairs service, which will lead to improvements in performance, tenant satisfaction and value for money.'**

*Dave Miles, Chief Executive of Mears*

In Scotland and Wales, requirements relating to repairs and maintenance are set out by regulation. In Scotland new statutory requirements will shortly be set out in the revised Scottish Social Housing Charter. The new Charter will be published in January or February 2012 and will take effect from April. For more information, visit the Scottish Government's website <http://home.scotland.gov.uk>. For the requirements in Wales, please visit <http://wales.gov.uk/docs/desh/publications/100920housingoutcomesen.pdf>.

#### How you can get involved with the campaign

We would welcome your input into developing the Repairs Charter. Please email your comments to [repairs@cih.org](mailto:repairs@cih.org). Alternatively, we are undertaking a formal consultation on the draft Repairs Charter throughout December. To take part in a short online questionnaire, please visit [www.cih.org/repairscharter](http://www.cih.org/repairscharter)

# What are the core elements that underpin a good repairs service?

This section looks at the important core elements identified both by tenants and landlords, setting out some fundamental principles which you should be aware of.

Key drivers that have been identified for a successful repairs service include:

- Senior management focus on the repairs and maintenance service
- Effective people and performance managers in middle management positions, with the right skills, expertise and knowledge
- Effective performance management information, measuring the 'right' performance indicators
- Effective resident scrutiny driving improvement
- Effective relationships with contractors
- Well skilled and equipped frontline staff, including tradespeople and call operatives
- Effective IT
- Strong focus on value for money, embedded across the whole organisation.

As the Getting the basics right campaign takes shape a number of building blocks to delivering a core repairs service are emerging from our advisory group and workshop feedback. The elements covered in this section are by no means definitive but give a flavour of the key features of a good repairs service, and are likely to form the basis of the forthcoming Repairs Charter.

They cover:

- Leadership and strategic commitment
- Having a clearly defined service
- Having an accessible and accountable service that is customer focused
- Value for money
- Managing performance.

The supporting good practice examples show where these elements are already contributing to the delivery of excellent repairs services to tenants:

## **Demonstrating leadership and strategic commitment**

Landlords must demonstrate a clear commitment to delivering an effective repairs and maintenance service. With strong corporate commitment and leadership, this includes:

- Ensuring that repairs and maintenance is recognised strategically as a core business priority, and has sufficient resources and capacity to deliver services efficiently
- Assigning clear operational responsibility for the repairs & maintenance service, regardless of delivery model, to the right people, with the right skills, in the right jobs to effectively lead and manage the service
- Where the service is delivered by another provider, ensuring that there is a well managed, clear and effective contract in place, with clear contingency plans in the event of contract failure.

## **Having a clearly defined repairs and maintenance service**

Landlords should have clear policies and procedures in place to ensure:

- Effective repair reporting and diagnostic processes that maximise the number of repairs that can be done in one visit
- A swift response to reported repairs
- Repairs completed to a good standard or quality
- An appointment system developed in consultation with tenants that meets the needs of tenants and delivers value for money
- A clear definition of the repairs that are covered by the repairs and maintenance

service, which is communicated effectively to staff and tenants

- Effective out of hours and emergency repair arrangements
- A focus on completing repairs 'in one visit' including the use of multi-skilled operatives, well stocked vans and minimising pre-inspections which can delay the repair process
- Clear policies and procedures for delivering the repairs and maintenance service, which set out roles and responsibilities for landlord, service provider (if applicable) and tenants
- A 'code of conduct' for repairs and maintenance staff which is developed with tenants and is delivered consistently
- An effective process in place to respond to any complaints or failures that rectifies the problem quickly when things go wrong, with lessons learned to improve the service
- Maximum use of innovative technologies and IT to support service delivery.

## **Having an accessible and accountable service that is customer focused**

Real accountability requires landlords to understand the needs and concerns of their tenants, and respond accordingly. Landlords should:

- Set clear service standards and ensure performance is monitored with tenants
- Ensure all tenants can easily access the repairs service, with a variety of ways to report repairs
- Offer a flexible appointment system that caters for working tenants
- Use all available information about tenants' households and stock attributes to deliver a service that is tailored and efficient
- Put mechanisms in place to effectively engage with residents around the development, delivery and scrutiny of repairs and maintenance services.

### Practice example

## Shepherds Bush Housing Association

In order to reduce the estimated £57,000 spent each year on abortive calls (estimated at 10% of all responsive repair visits). Shepherds Bush has introduced a recharge procedure, charging tenants £25 for each abortive visit where an appointment has been agreed with the tenant at the time of reporting the repair. This matches the £25 compensation paid to tenants where the contractor misses an appointment.

In addition extending repairs reporting hours to 10pm in the evening has reduced the numbers of emergency calls being received, as call operatives have access to the full repair history and can appropriately allocate the work during non emergency hours.

### Practice example

## Livin Housing Association

Livin has streamlined the traditional repairs priorities into just two categories 'emergency' and 'appointed'.

All emergency repairs are attended to within two hours, and completed within 24 hours. All other repairs are carried out by appointment at a convenient time to the tenants by their contractor Mears. This has improved productivity and satisfaction levels.

### Practice example

## Bromford Living

As a developing organisation, Bromford Living needed to respond to the credit crunch by reducing costs. In particular they needed to reduce repairs and maintenance spend to compensate for reducing government grant for development.

Bromford Living undertook a full service restructure, and revisited contract terms and conditions. Contracts were re-procured group wide to achieve simplified management and pricing terms. New housing management and asset management software was also installed.

As a result Bromford achieved improving performance results, and top quartile performance. Customer satisfaction has remained steady at 95% or above.

### Practice example

## Mossclare Housing

Mossclare Housing has released a bespoke smartphone app for tenants to report repairs. Free to download, the app allows customers to report a repair or other issues such as anti-social behaviour at any time of the day or night, and attach photographs to clarify the required repair.

### Practice example

## Birmingham City Council

Birmingham City Council has saved in excess of £50m through the procurement of repairs and maintenance contracts for the north and central area of the city (2008) and the south in 2010. This has involved:

- Strong IT policy
- Standardised diagnostic system (Omfax)
- Standardised appointment and scheduling system (Optitime)
- Strong partnering principles and vision for service to 2015
- Tendered price reductions year on year
- Incentives for partners to increase profits by reducing costs and increasing performance.

Improved outcomes for tenants include:

- Expanded appointment times
- Increased focus on delivering in one visit
- Reduced number of service failures.

### Practice example

## "Johnnie" Johnson Housing Association

"Johnnie" Johnson Housing Association has introduced an automated telephone contact system (Tickle) to capture measure and report satisfaction. The new system has increased the volume of feedback compared to traditional paper systems, provides the association with an instant snapshot of satisfaction at any given time, proactively manages dissatisfaction and has reduced costs associated with paper and telephone based surveys.

For more information visit:  
[www.jjhousing.co.uk/tickle](http://www.jjhousing.co.uk/tickle)

## Practice example

## Parkway Green Housing Trust

The Repairs Excellence Project was kick started to address customer satisfaction levels of only 78%. A new system was introduced to replace the out dated bonus system and performance that was previously focused on productivity that was having a negative impact on delivering a quality repairs service.

The bonus structure was replaced with a customer focused performance scheme. A rota scheme means tenants are offered an extended appointment system, that includes early morning, evenings and weekends. Bespoke training for all operational staff and the introduction of hand-held technology has all contributed to driving up customer satisfaction to 95%.

### Ensuring value for money is embedded across all aspects of the service

In today's economic climate delivering value for money has never been more important. Balancing the need to make efficiency savings against the quality of services delivered means landlords should:

- Ensure value for money is understood and embedded across the service, and that all resources are used effectively and efficiently, balancing the need to drive down costs with maintaining an acceptable quality of service
- Manage stock effectively
- Understand the cost of providing the repairs and maintenance service, and how this compares to other landlords. Information on cost performance should be reported to tenants and staff
- Offer opportunities for tenants to be involved in decision making regarding the allocation of resources and the delivery of 'added value' services

- Regularly evaluate procured services and products to ensure value for money is being achieved
- Have an effective and considered approach to rechargeable repairs.

### Managing performance

Landlords should have in place an effective performance management system that has:

- A repairs and maintenance improvement plan in place that contains all actions that need to be implemented to improve the service and is updated on an on-going basis
- An effective quality control process in place
- An effective performance management framework in place to monitor and review performance, with challenging performance targets measured at a strategic, team and individual level
- Processes for the collection of information on tenant satisfaction with the service and uses that information to improve the service.

# What are the 'nice to haves'?



There are considerable differences in the range and quality of repairs services offered to tenants, depending upon who their landlord is. While 'added value' services are important, getting the basics right should remain the primary goal.



- Handyperson schemes
- Enhanced quality assurance processes
- Flexible or extended opening hours or appointments (for example evening or weekend appointments)
- Tailored service provision, driven by profile information
- A proactive approach to identifying repairs or analysis of repeat repairs
- Repairs and housing management IT systems which are integrated with one another.

## Practice example

### Wolverhampton Homes

Wolverhampton Homes launched the Build Your Skills programme in August 2011 to help tenants develop their skills and give them the aspiration to improve their homes.

To date, six sessions have been held at two levels - DIY Basics (health and safety, electrical, plumbing, energy efficiency, painting and wallpapering) and DIY Plus (carpentry, wallpaper and painting).

Build Your Skills has been a huge success so far, with more than 40 tenants attending the sessions. Additional sessions have been scheduled for early 2012.

Landlords and tenants alike should be clear that some 'added value' services come at a cost which is directly linked to rental income. At a time when landlords are being forced to drive down costs, tenants need to be offered greater choice around the repairs services they both need or are prepared to pay for.

Examples of 'added value' services could include:

- More precise appointment systems (such as 2 hour appointment slots)
- Additional repairs reporting methods, or the ability to track a repair
- 'Call or text ahead' processes from operatives



## Other useful resources

- Improving Repairs and Maintenance Services: A Good Practice Guide - [http://www.cih.org/publication/display/vpathDCR//templatedata/cih/publication/data/Improving\\_Repairs\\_and\\_Maintenance\\_Services](http://www.cih.org/publication/display/vpathDCR//templatedata/cih/publication/data/Improving_Repairs_and_Maintenance_Services)
- Managing Voids - Letting Homes - [http://www.cih.org/publication/display/vpathDCR//templatedata/cih/publication/data/Managing\\_Voids\\_-\\_Letting\\_Homes](http://www.cih.org/publication/display/vpathDCR//templatedata/cih/publication/data/Managing_Voids_-_Letting_Homes)
- Practice online, CIH's online good practice resource, Repairs and maintenance chapter - <http://www.cih.org/PracticeOnline>
- CIH Level 2 Qualification in Repairs and Maintenance - [http://www.cih.org/qualification/display/vpathDCR/templatedata/cih/qualification/data/CIH\\_L2\\_C\\_in\\_Housing\\_Maintenance\\_QCF](http://www.cih.org/qualification/display/vpathDCR/templatedata/cih/qualification/data/CIH_L2_C_in_Housing_Maintenance_QCF)



# What you can expect to see from us, and when?

Outcomes from the campaign will include the publication of a sector-developed Charter on responsive, void and gas repairs, with supporting practical advice and online tools to support landlords to implement the Charter and drive forward improvements. Planned and cyclical repairs and servicing will be covered in a future charter on asset management.

For more information on proposed outputs and timetable see [www.cih.org/repairscharter](http://www.cih.org/repairscharter)

## Where to find us

CIH and Mears will be jointly running campaign workshops and showcasing the new Charter at the following events:

- The National Housing Maintenance Forum Conference on 24 January 2012 in Stratford
- CIH Annual Conference South East Region, Brighton 6 – 8 March 2012

There will be further regional events in March/April 2011 – details will be added to [www.cih.org/repairscharter](http://www.cih.org/repairscharter) in the new year.

## Led by the sector

To ensure our messages are informed by the sector all aspects of the project are being overseen by a steering group of key sector agencies, including the National Housing and Maintenance Forum, HouseMark, TPAS and TAROE. In addition an advisory group made up of repairs experts and practitioners from 26 different landlords will inform the campaign and its outputs.

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