****

**Customer Service Investigators**

**“Gas servicing”**

**February 2016**

**“Customer Service Investigator” project on gas servicing**

**(February 2016)**

1. **Introduction**

In November 2015 the Thirteen Customer Scrutiny panel were asked by the Group Property Services Director to undertake a Scrutiny project on repairs timescales, tenant responsibilities, Right First Time and gas servicing.

The aspect of the brief given to the Scrutiny panel on gas servicing was commissioned out to an involved customer group called the “Customer Service Investigators” (CSIs). The CSI group undertook a specific investigation into the issue of no access.

First time access rates for gas servicing have historically been only about 66% with the need for second and often third time appointments to be made before engineers complete this essential task.

Approximately 2,300 gas visits are planned each month and with only 66% access rates at the first appointment there is a significant waste of resources. Each “no access” visit has to be rearranged on top of next month’s 2,300 planned visits, and each aborted visit costs approximately £25. The estimated costs to Thirteen Group between April and October 2015 for missed appointments was almost £136K.

1. Approach

Further customer insight was needed to try and understand more clearly why tenants refuse access and how this could improve in the future. Between December 2015 and January 2016 the CSIs (8 customers from across all four landlords) investigated the reasons and solutions to this problem using the following approaches;

* Online and postal survey sent to 400 customers from the Customer Voice (98 responses or approximately 25% response rate) – see Appendix 1
* Three focus groups of customers from the above surveys in each of the core towns
* Online survey of all 31 gas service engineers (14 responses or approximately 45% response rate)
* Focus group of 2 gas safety engineers

*A phone survey was planned of customers who had not allowed access until the second/third/fourth visit, however as a result of system issues, this was not feasible. However it has been recommended as a further form of investigation in the recommendations in this report*.

**3. Key recommendations**

**3.1 Appointments – general**

1. Appointment slots should be shorter and either for one or two hours, rather than half/full day to address the issue of 40% of customers not being at home at any one time, and to enable them to keep appointments with minimum disruption to their lifestyle.
2. A pilot to be run across the Group returning to a zoned approach to gas servicing across estates to address the issues of inefficiency reported by the gas servicing teams and to see if access rates are higher.
3. The first letter sent out informing customers of their gas servicing appointment should be sent out one week before and not two weeks before their appointment.
4. CSAs and Out-of-Hours (OOH) teams should be able to book gas servicing appointments in, so customers can book appointments quickly and efficiently rather than being put through to another team.
5. Customers should be able to rearrange a gas servicing appointment in a variety of ways rather than just phoning in. This should include a dedicated e mail address, voicemail service, Facebook/Twitter, calling in at customer outlets and speaking to any member of staff they see on an estate.
6. Gas servicing appointments should be offered on weekdays (am and pm), evenings (up to 7pm) and also weekends (Saturday and Sunday 10-4pm) and this should be made clear on the letter they receive about their first appointment so they can ring and choose their preferred option.
7. Consider a pilot where customers are called on the phone to arrange their first appointment as well as/rather than being sent a letter to see if this system improves first time access.
8. New tenants should be given more comprehensive information about the urgency of allowing first time access for gas servicing at their two/four week visit.

**3.2 Appointments – letters**

1. Changes to be made to the first letter sent out to customers to make the message “harder hitting”. These to include the date being in bigger and bolder font, a photo of a house that has had a gas explosion (this also impresses the urgency on those who cannot read very well as to the content of the letter) and that a person aged 18 or over must be present.
2. All appointment letters sent to be in colour (currently Housing Hartlepool are in red and Erimus is black and white) to grab customers’ attentions.
3. Appointment letters to include details of what their gas servicing visit entails and that it can save them money on their heating after the service has taken place.
4. The envelopes in which letters are sent to have the following text in red and bold on the front “Important information about your gas servicing appointment is included in this letter – you must read it”.
5. Appointment letters should ask a customer if the current contact details are correct and offer quick and simple ways to update them (text, e mail, Facebook) rather than having to ring in.

**3.3 Communication**

1. A phone survey is recommended to identify reasons for no access (as was originally planned as part of this Scrutiny piece) to try and understand the issues they face and how access could be improved. More in-depth analysis of the customer profiles of “no access” customers is needed to enable targeted approaches to be taken
2. Customers should be texted the day before, the morning of and when the engineer is en-route to remind them to be in.
3. Information sent to the PDAs should contain more information about a person’s vulnerabilities or needs (such as takes a long time to answer the door) so engineers can be more responsive to such situations.
4. Gas engineers to explain and show customers where their “turn off” points are for gas, electric and water and to label these switches/taps accordingly for future reference. New tenants to be shown this at the first home visit by their Neighbourhood Officer.
5. Gas servicing engineers should be able to input any information they find about a person such as their vulnerabilities/best appointment times on Orchard following a visit.
6. Gas engineers should be able to ring repairs to the OOH teams to be inputted into Orchard while they are at the customers’ home so they can give the customer the appointment there and then.
7. Thirteen Group to liaise with local Fire Brigades about campaigns on estates to raise awareness of not only fire safety issues but gas servicing and carbon monoxide poisoning.
8. More regular meetings between gas engineers and managers to take place to allow information sharing and good practice to be cascaded across the gas teams.

**3.4 Fines or incentives**

1. Instead of considering fines for those not allowing access, which was seen as unworkable and not a positive approach to changing behaviour, the CSIs feel that a monthly prize draw in each of the three areas that gas servicing is broken down into, is a better way to increase access. A pilot is proposed for a 10 month period offering £250 prize draw per area, per month, to see if this increases access rates.

**4. Key findings from the surveys**

**4.1 Customer survey**

Two surveys were carried out as part of this project. The first was a survey sent to 400 customers from the Customer Voice (Thirteen’s involved customer database), of which 98 were returned (approximately 25%). More detailed information can be found in Appendix 1, but some of the key findings are listed below;

* 81% of those who took part claimed to have allowed access at the first visit with only 9% claiming they allowed access at second visit .
* 59% of respondents claimed they were at home all day with 41% either not being at home during the day at all (17%) or saying it depended on the day (24%). This shows us that 1 in 6 of our customers are having to either take leave from work or have friends/family be in for them during the day.
* For those customers who missed their first appointment the most common reasons were they forgot about the appointment, an emergency came up, they didn’t hear the engineer or that the letter arrived the day before and was too short notice
* 22% of customers rang to rearrange their appointment.
* 80% of customers who tried to ring and rearrange their appointment gave up due to the length of time taken to get through to the gas service team having been put on hold by the Contact team.
* 66% who didn’t bother to ring to rearrange their appointment said they didn’t do this as they knew they would just get another appointment.
* 71% of customers said they preferred to ring their landlord to rearrange their appointment, with another 8% preferring e mail and 3% using Facebook.
* The majority of respondents said they would prefer 1 weeks’ notice (49%) with 33% preferring two weeks. 10% were happy for the engineers to call anytime without notice.
* 51% of respondents thought customers should be recharged for not allowing access with only 41% thinking they should not be charged.
* Of those who thought a fine should be levied 42% thought £10 was appropriate with 38% thinking £5 was more suitable.
* 69% of respondents prefer a Mon-Fri am/pm slot however 22% would consider an evening appointment, 12% would be happy with a Saturday visit and 11% a Sunday visit.
* 64% of customers would be happy to get a text the day before, on the morning of the day itself and when the engineer is en-route.
* 91% of customers know it is a legal requirement with only 9% not knowing this.
* 82% of respondents have a mobile phone.

Additional comments from customers completing the survey

* Fines might cause more trouble than it's worth by having to obtain the payment
* Staff need to learn to call at the agreed time not when they feel like calling.
* Always had a good experience when the test has been carried out
* Ask gas men to cover their shoes before walking up peoples stairs boilers
* Could the tenant receive a copy of all safety checks like we used to
* Do as many as possible on the same day in the same building
* Explain more on how the heating works
* I have campaigned for years to extend the gas servicing at reasonable costs to leaseholders especially if they live above Thirteen tenants in same building
* Because I am disabled, they have gone before I was able to get to the door
* I think charges are questionable depending on reason entry is not available
* It would be nice to have a full time warden to let these workmen in to do this
* Send out half day appointments not full day and do neighbouring properties in sequence where possible. It looks bad if they do a neighbour then go off and come back some time later
* These legal implications, access problems and the hidden costs for providing a gas supply should be recognised when proposing conversion to gas in Thirteen's properties
* Organisations with a good sustainability policy should be divesting from gas as its use is a major contributor to CO2 and consequently global warming

**4.2 Gas service engineers’ survey**

The second survey was a shorter survey sent to all 31 gas service engineers of which 14 were completed (45%). Engineers were asked their views on the following key areas, some of their comment are listed below;

What are some of the most common reasons for no access ?

* Customers don’t care less, see the whole thing as an inconvenience
* Customers claiming they didn’t receive a letter or too short notice is given
* Know they can have a few appointments missed without anything happening
* Not bothered about letting us in, not realising how important the annual service is
* Sometimes don't have the money for gas (if they pay by card) and are worried that they would get into trouble if can’t service boiler as result
* Some properties are being misused as a postal address with no one living there.
* Customers not informing Thirteen Group that they can’t make the appointments.
* Customers taking kids to school
* Some customers won't get out of bed till late in the morning
* Work commitments
* New appointment system cannot give tenant morning or afternoon time
* Customer informed of visit two week’ prior and have forgotten, especially elderly
* Broken appointment, when customer is told am and we turn up pm. and vice versa. Customers told they will receive text for appointment date and this doesn't happen
* Customers say we don't take enough consideration to instructions regarding school runs, doctor’s appointments, hospital appointments etc ..
* Do not understand the penalties placed upon the company if the appointment goes over a certain time scale
* Hiding things in the property that they think we will report them for such as drugs

What are your ideas for improving access?

* We have moved away from serving in block areas or engineers working in one street each day, need to return to this system
* Working random areas means now less chance of catching tenants that may have popped out for short periods such as school run
* Educate them on the dangers of Carbon Monoxide poisoning
* Explain that their gas bill is cheaper due to the boiler being serviced
* Reminder texts and calls, like on repairs
* Gas safe literature to show the importance of the visit
* Offering a more flexible appointment service with phone numbers available to access for customers would be easier. A lot of tenants work shifts etc. so 8am til 4pm time slot isn't very useful to them
* A reward scheme called “be in to win” where the tenants are entered into a monthly draw if they allow us in on the first try
* Repeat “no accessors” should be reminded in their first letter appointment
* We need to know more about our customers who live in our homes. Better communication and consideration between departments that we all have a job to do and passing on information from the front line up to the relevant departments
* Certain departments would have a better understanding if there was some 'job shadowing' with our front line staff who work or visit properties
* Fines for not rearranging appointments/missed appointments
* Trust needs to be developed that we will do what we promise and we expect the same back in return. Fundamentally we need to show we care
* The engineer to phone in advance of calling to the property, which could be helpful if he/she is running late keeping the tenant up to date
* Give gas service engineers all addresses in morning so we use our unique knowledge to plan our own work and would also be able to make a return visit which often results in access
* Ask neighbours for times tenant may be in were possible
* Void properties are being mixed up amongst the list of appointments so when we arrive we find them void, but still we have to put "card in door" on the system

Should tenants be recharged for no access and how much?

Of the 14 responses it was split evenly between 7 saying “yes” and 7 saying “no”. Of those who said they should be recharged, the majority (4) said it should be £20 and 2 engineers thought it should be £50.

Are there any particular types of customer who don’t allow access?

* Elderly are the best, young mothers worst
* Young family's early mornings and school run times
* Usually singles in flats
* I would say that young single mum's and young families are more likely to be out when we call
* Under 30's, young families and anyone who lives in a flat
* People ashamed about state of house whether they are untidy, have carried out unapproved alterations, alcoholics and drug users, religious reasons for not allowing non-family men into property
* Working families are not given the opportunity to ask for late appointments
* I think all of the groups mentioned and others are probably guilty of not towing the line sometimes not one single group stands out
* I think working families need appointments within 2 hours

**4.3 Key findings from interviews with staff and gas service engineers**

**Strengths**

1. Gas engineers can work until 6pm on an evening and undertake Saturday morning visits if the customer requests it, so those customers who are working can receive a more flexible service
2. The new Promaster software, (for organising gas safety checks) now has all gas engineers in one system across the three geographical areas, which according to managers will result in more efficient distribution of jobs and management of workload generally
3. Some work has been done on developing a semi-zonal approach to gas servicing and planned maintenance programme, which would mean a high presence on certain estates for a month to address gas servicing/batched repairs which are then followed up later in the year in a similar fashion. This could improve gas servicing access issues and a more cost effective approach to wider estate/property repair problems.
4. A predictive tool is being installed into Orchard to identify when gas boilers are due for servicing thus preventing emergencies in the future
5. Detailed reporting in Orchard will allow comprehensive performance data to be produced for gas, electrical and asbestos checks, including the number of properties accessed at first visit and how we are performing against a five year plan

**Areas for improvement**

1. Gas engineers preferred the older system where they were given a list of addresses for the day rather than being sent one job at a time as is currently in place. It allowed them to plan their day more efficiently and would also allow them to contact customers when en-route and remind them to be in. Engineers reported that three separate engineers were sent to Sunderland from Hartlepool because of the way this system allocates one job at a time
2. Gas servicing engineers are currently told they cannot carry out minor gas repairs if discovered while servicing the boiler but must report this through as a separate repair creating another appointment for a member of the gas repair team. This is frustrating for the customer, is inefficient and is causing some bad feeling between the gas repair team and the gas servicing team when they are passed such minor works.
3. Gas servicing engineers cannot add any anecdotal information they find about a customer (such as information from neighbours about working patterns) onto Orchard which could then prevent any further appointments being generated which are unsuitable.
4. Gas engineers are not aware who send the appointment letters out or whether reminder texts are sent to customers. All engineers should be aware of the communication systems in place.
5. Gas engineers are being sent to void properties by mistake as the current system does not realise they are void but only that a gas service is due.
6. The survey of gas engineers shows that certain customer groups are more likely to not allow access such as young singles, young mothers, people living in flats, alcohol/drug dependents and people carrying out illegal activities in their properties.
7. One gas engineer reported having 27 no access in three days
8. Neighbourhood Officers’ knowledge of customers is not used to address access issues until later on in the process
9. Engineers suggested job shadowing by more senior managers would help them understand the frontline issues more, and also that more team meetings were needed.

* 1. **Key findings from focus groups of customers**

Three focus groups were held, one in each of the core towns of Hartlepool, Stockton and Middlesbrough, with attendees volunteering to be part of these on their gas servicing survey form. Each attendee was given a £10 shopping voucher and in total 12 customers attended. Most of the comments raised have been incorporated into the recommendations for this chapter however other comments and issues raised included;

* Private landlords are much stricter when it comes to gas servicing, passing the costs of a missed appointment to their tenants for not being in
* Gathering knowledge from neighbours about a “no access” neighbour (such as working shifts, school runs) can be useful in preventing further “no access” at future visits
* Article in every newsletter about the dangers and importance of not allowing access for your gas servicing
* Questioning whether it is legal to charge for no access?
* Fines should only be used for second visits and further ones
* Could you prevent an introductory tenant from converting into an Assured tenant if they don’t allow access?
* All customers agreed with evening and weekend appointments
* Prize draws for allowing first time access were generally agreed with the prize draw amount ranging from £20-50 per month, per area, and should be supermarket vouchers and not “Love to Shop”
* Lot of people have trouble reading and therefore photos should be used to draw attention to the content of the letter. Ideas included houses after a gas explosion and a tombstone “RIP due to CO poisoning”
* You can’t ring through for a gas appointment after the call centre closes, I work and don’t get in until 6pm
* Why can’t workmen on our estates or Estate officers ring and make an appointment for me?
* So hard getting through to rearrange an appointment, also it costs a lot on mobiles doesn’t it?
* Can you book them through Facebook?
* We used to get a certificate for our gas safety check but haven’t had one for years
* Sometimes the call centre staff’s attitude after 5pm isn’t as good as it could be
* Engineers should give you other information such as winter warmth payments, what’s going on in Thirteen and how to use your heating properly
* The gas engineer should check if the tenant has any repairs that need doing and ring them in for the tenant

**5. Thank you**

We would like to thank all the customers, managers and staff we interviewed and who gave their time to speak to us as part of this project, for their honesty and for sharing areas which they had identified for service improvement. We would like to thank those involved for sharing data, policies and information with us.

The “CSIs” who undertook the project on gas servicing were;

Gill Baines (Erimus)

Janet Hoggett (Erimus)

Brenda Pearce (Tristar Homes)

Jean Price (Hartlepool resident)

Jenny Shotton (Tristar Homes)

Cath Torley (Hartlepool resident)

Mavis Videmour (Erimus)

Jackie White (Tristar Homes)

Finally we would like to thank Jonathan Cannon and Emma Maddison for supporting us.

**Appendix 1 Gas servicing survey results**

**  **

 ** **

 ** **

 ** **

 ** **

 ****