

Agenda item: 

**Decision maker:** Housing Cabinet Member Steven Wylie

**Subject:** Housing Service Continuous Improvement Status Report

**Date of decision:** 16 March 2010

**Report by:** Owen Buckwell, Head of Local Authority Housing Management

**Wards affected:** ALL

**Key decision:** No

**Budget & policy framework decision:** No

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## **1. Summary**

The Housing service embarked on a series of interventions into various service delivery in 2007 in order to develop a method of continuous improvement that automatically takes into account customers changing demands. That process is still underway. However, significant improvements in customer satisfaction have been achieved to date and the overall reduction in the levels of complaints is down significantly over the period. This report outlines the progress and improvements in customer service so far on some of our key delivery streams.

## **2. Purpose of report**

The purpose of the report is to provide a status report on the Housing Services progress in improving customer services as requested by the Housing cabinet member.

## **3. Recommendations**

- 3.1** That the Housing cabinet member notes the improvements made to the Housing service over the last three years and continues to support our approach to continuous improvement.

## **4. Areas of Improvement**

### **4.1 Voids and Allocations**

#### **4.1.1 Background**

In 2006 the Portsmouth Housing register contained 10,500 registrations, waiting for 1300 properties available to be let each year. Many people would never stand a realistic chance of being housed. The process of being registered was complicated and costly and could take up to 2-3 weeks after that customers had to wait with no idea if and when they would

be allocated a property. The process for tenants who wanted to transfer was equally complex and lengthy.

At the start of our intervention into allocations preparations were well underway to adopt a version of the Governments choice based lettings initiative (CBL). The intervention team, having noted that there was no demand from applicants for such a scheme, decided that CBL was an expensive and unnecessary process for letting property. CBL built in delays whilst the property was advertised; whilst the bids were collected and it fostered false hope, for example if 10 people bid 9 people were always going to be disappointed.

To do something about this we listened to customers wherever they placed a demand on the service so that we could understand in their terms what they wanted from the service. In analysing demand and service delivery we found no demand for a scheme based on bidding for properties.

We then experimented with different methods of dealing with their demands asking the customer what they needed as we went along. Wherever possible we did what the customer wanted unless it was a demand outside of the scope of our service. At each stage we evaluated the impact of what we had done and did more and more work until we knew what worked best.

#### **4.1.2 The Improved Process**

Tenants wanting to end their tenancy now have a choice over how much notice they give us. It no longer matters to us if the tenant gives us 4 weeks notice or 1 days notice we can cope with either scenario.

When someone wants to apply to join the housing register we assess their circumstances without the need for a confusing form to complete. All the customer needs to do is contact us in whatever manor suits them; in person, by e-mail, or over the phone. The average time it takes between applying and joining the list is 40 minutes in 80% of cases a dramatic improvement on the 2 to 3 weeks previously. We understand what type of property is available over time and in what areas and we use this data to advise customers what will make a realistic registration.

All the people who did not stand a realistic chance of being housed were removed from the waiting list, this was as a result of realising that we only house those in most need. This has reduced the housing register from 10,500 to about 3,000 so the cost of maintaining the register has reduced, the time which was wasted managing pointless registrations has been redirected towards valuable work for our customers. Such as helping the homeless. As a result we now spend less on emergency bed and breakfast accommodation and people spend less time in temporary housing.

We have created a new role called New Tenancy Officers and these people make the offer of a council home, meet the people at the viewing, agree works with the contractors, sign up new tenants and ensure they have all the benefits and advice they need to get their tenancy off to a good start. The timescales we use are the customers, asking them when they want to sign up and asking them what they think of the property whilst we are in the property with them in case there is something small we can do in the refurbishment that might better suits their needs. We don't restrict offers to two offers only anymore allowing

people more freedom and choice to accept or refuse the property. We no longer have different categories of voids with target timescales and schedules of works as standard activity. We just have 'voids' and we turn them round based on the time it takes only to do the work needed. We only pay for what is needed in terms of labour and materials as opposed to a fixed 'win some/ lose some' contract. Overall the new system gives choice throughout the whole process rather than just at the start or the end of the process.

85% of all the customers dealt with in housing options are happy with our service. The dissatisfied customers feel that the interview left them confused and some don't like having to wait to be seen.

For those people who we house satisfaction with the service from the point of requesting housing to it being delivered and moving in the average satisfaction score is 92% based on 1881 responses.

#### **4.1.3 Future Planned Improvements**

We have the following in the pipeline; consultation with residents and members about our allocations policy with a view to changing it if opinion requires it, a new way of helping our tenants to find exchanges, building a new IT system to hold housing applications and inform the customer about waiting time and property availability, improve the skills of officers providing housing options advice, further improvements to our temporary housing options.

#### **4.2 Green and Clean**

Our Green and Clean service (which encompasses all the cleaning and grounds maintenance services to Housing Communal areas as well as collection of bulk refuse) has seen some big changes in the past 2 years. All areas have now introduced a new way of working which has seen the service move away from a specification and schedule based service to one where we endeavour to 'keep the local area clean and tidy'. We have learnt what resource levels are required to meet the demands for green and clean services and we understand these demands much more clearly through listening to our customers

This service is now provided by 6 in-house area based teams. (Some of these were previously provided by external contractors) A new management structure has been introduced which includes a green and clean manager and senior operative(s) in each area. We have also introduced a specialist cleaning team who operate across all areas providing services such as window cleaning, graffiti and moss removal.

We have improved the tools and equipment that the teams use and are constantly reviewing use of materials (these include cleaning fluids, better storage and sharing of mechanical tools). In fact, there are now more staff, extra equipment and more areas cleaned at no extra cost.

We also collect customer satisfaction scores as we deliver the service and learn from the feedback not just about the cleaning or grounds maintenance but also about other maintenance and tenancy issues, which can impact on these services. In November 2009 the average customer satisfaction score was 94%. In addition Hampshire Fire & Rescue

wrote to us last year stating that they had seen a dramatic reduction in fires on our estates.

### **4.3 Repairs Service**

#### **4.3.1 Response Repairs**

After a prolonged period of change, staff continue to work closely with our five service providers in developing our service delivery against the repair and maintenance demands of our residents and properties.

We are the only service in the country to have fully reviewed the delivery of a repairs service from the point of supplying materials to the completion and payment of the repair. We have overhauled not only our part of the service but also that delivered by our service providers.

Our service providers now understand more accurately when customer demand for repairs is received. They often experience higher volume of calls on certain days of the week and at certain times of the day and can therefore plan their workforce resources effectively. Collaborative working between area offices and their service providers has resulted in a one stop "actual time" appointment service being offered to residents to suit their requirements when they first make contact with their area office to report the repair. At the same time when undertaking the repair customers are asked if there are any further problems with the property requiring repair.

As a result customer experiences of the complete repair process have significantly improved. Customer satisfaction levels are much higher than 3 years ago (currently standing at 99% satisfaction as opposed to 68%) and area offices have seen a significant reduction in the number of repeat and customer follow up calls.

The further development and implementation of a bespoke IT repairs and maintenance database has enabled us to record accurate information about our stock together with robust and transparent repair history. Having this information available to the staff who use it on a daily basis enables us to more effectively manage the repair process but also enables us to plan more accurately future planned maintenance work requirements. We work much more closely with our contractors in reducing costs and improving services. For example we have supported our service providers reviews, we have introduced NEC3 contracts which facilitate partnership working.

#### **4.3.2 Planned Maintenance**

Our approach to asset management of the Housing stock has fundamentally changed and is no longer reliant on outdated historical cyclical maintenance programmes, but focused on maintaining and improving our property where and when the work is actually required.

Good asset management is firstly reliant on accurate and robust stock data information, over the past year Surveyors have focused on undertaking more internal and external stock condition surveys and as a result our stock database is now more accurate. This together with linking our repairs and voids databases to the stock database continues to enable us to have better informed knowledge of where planned maintenance work is required.

The result is that Planned Maintenance staff and financial resources are directed to geographical areas and work types where the work is actually required as opposed to simply being allocated to meet traditional planned maintenance programmes based on inaccurate data where the work is not necessarily required.

Our Surveyors evaluate the work required to the whole block and are no longer constrained by predetermined programmes of work. The consequence is that no unnecessary work is undertaken; only the work actually required at the time of the survey is included in the planned maintenance scheme. This together with modern longer lasting materials has resulted in increased cycle periods on some work types such as external decorations that traditionally were undertaken every 5 years but are now 7/8 years, enabling financial resources to be redirected to other work types or geographical areas where necessary.

The impact of the new way of undertaking response repairs and voids has also has an impact on the profile of the type of work undertaken as part of planned maintenance schemes. Kitchens and bathrooms are typically more likely to be replaced when required within the scope of the response repair service or when a property becomes void, as opposed to a customer waiting to be part of a larger planned maintenance scheme. This has resulted in the realignment of budgets so that work is carried out at the point of need.

#### **4.4 Out of Hours**

The out of hour's service provides suitable help when needed. Although the revised service is not yet been introduced work is currently being undertaken to determine how best it can be achieved. It will no longer simply provide a make safe service but will be able to provide a similar service to that provided 'in hours' where appropriate.

For example residents requesting emergency repairs will be offered specific timed appointments, if it is the right time to complete a repair and it meets the resident's requirements, then it will be completed out of normal office hours. If the repair is not completed the resident will be offered a convenient follow on appointment in normal office hours.

The existing repairs out of hours service had more capacity than was required to meet demand for the service, the new way of working will utilise both contractor and Housing staff resources more efficiently whilst also providing a more responsive service, not just for repairs but for cleaning, re-housing and anti social behaviour.

#### **4.5 Rental income**

Work on the rental income intervention is progressing well. The new way of working is ready to be launched but is reliant on the completion of the bespoke rental income IT system. That system is designed and in test. The intervention is now focussed on the preparation to roll in the new system and new way of working. Customers will be given more choice in the way they pay their rent and the frequency with which rent is paid. The IT system is designed specifically to help housing officers and others proactively manage rent accounts and moves away from a rent arrears system to a rent account management

system. There will be a greater emphasis on personal contact with residents and a greater emphasis on the provision of help. The new way of working sits alongside the introduction of the New Tenancy Officers with an emphasis on setting up tenancies successfully when residents first join Housing.

#### **4.6 Generic Benefit derived from improved services**

##### **Customer Services**

We continue to have customer service teams based in each of our seven area housing offices. They deal with the first point of contact for customer enquiries at our cash counters and general enquiry counters. In some of the area offices they are joined by Revenue and Benefit colleagues, Benefit Customer Service Officers providing housing benefit and other benefit advice and support.

Over the last few years we have seen the demands our customers make on our counters and phones change. We have seen a movement away from repeat calls for example customers calling us to chase things or tell us about something in our service that hasn't worked well. Our customer service teams are also understanding in more detail when and how we receive customer demands. In some offices we see high volumes of calls on certain days and at certain times throughout the day which helps us make sure we have enough customer relations officers at those points.

As this knowledge has developed we have seen our structure evolve and are now completing a restructure to ensure we have the right number of customer relations officers and the right levels of customer managers and team leaders to continue to meet our demands and to achieve value for money services. This has resulted in a net saving of approximately £300K per annum.

#### **5. Options considered and rejected**

5.1 There are no relevant options to the aim of improving service delivery.

#### **6. Duty to involve**

6.1 The processes employed have ensured that Housing service customers are consulted on a one-to-one basis as they present demand at the point of need.

#### **7. Implications**

7.1 The summary of service improvements detailed above are intrinsically positive for all Housing service customers.

#### **8. Corporate priorities**

This report and the project it refers to contribute to the following Corporate Priorities:

- Increase availability and quality of housing
- Improve efficiency and encourage involvement

- Cleaner and greener city

**9. Equality impact assessment (EIA)**

9.1 There are no inherent issues of inequality as a result of these service improvements. An EIA will be carried out on the various services as per the Housing Business plan.

**10. Legal implications**

10.1 To be reported.

**11. Head of finance's comments**

11.1 The ongoing improvement work now embedded in the Housing service is funded and can be met from within existing cash limits.

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Signed by: **Owen Buckwell, Head of Housing Management**

**Appendices: None**

The recommendation(s) set out above were approved/ approved as amended/ deferred/ rejected by [title of decision maker] on [insert date of meeting].

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Signed by: **Steven Wylie, Cabinet Member for Housing**