



## **How satisfied are customers with the responsive repair service?**

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## Summary

Members of Scrutiny, Involvement For Tenants (SIFT) carried out a scrutiny exercise to assess customer satisfaction levels for responsive repairs carried out.

SIFT used a number of scrutiny tools to gather evidence for the scrutiny exercise, for example surveys and Mystery Shopping, and followed key lines of enquiry.

The main findings include:

- Every customer who has a repair carried out in their home receives an automated telephone survey unless they opt out
- The performance target for satisfaction is 92 percent, but the current average satisfaction level is 88.13 percent
- The overall level of satisfaction is the only measure used, whereas the different aspects of carrying out the repair are not measured
- YHN do not measure how many repairs they get 'right first time', however they do measure 'completions on first visit'
- There has been a 15 percent reduction in the numbers of customers responding to the automated telephone service over a two year period
- Customers are generally happy with their responsive repairs service
- Not all members of staff show ID upon arrival to complete a responsive repair
- Not all members of staff are aware of the Right to Repair Regulations.

SIFT's main recommendations are:

- Other methods to test satisfaction levels should be explored
- Right first time repairs should be measured to comply with the Home Standard
- Staff are to be reminded to show their ID to customers upon arrival to complete a repair.

## **Introduction**

This third scrutiny report of the Financial Year 2018/19 was produced by SIFT – Scrutiny, Involvement For Tenants – which accurately describes what the group does, that is, sifting through information to look for evidence from which to analyse service activity and recommend change.

## **2. Scope of the Scrutiny Exercise**

The scope of the scrutiny exercise is to investigate: How satisfied or dissatisfied customers are with the responsive repairs service.

The purpose of this scrutiny exercise is to:

- Explore how satisfactions levels are assessed
- Compare and contrast how other organisations offer the service
- Recommend, where appropriate changes to the service.

This report details the findings and recommendations of this scrutiny exercise, which took place between January and March 2019.

## **3. Methodology**

There are a variety of tools which can be used to scrutinise services, performance and governance. The tools selected on this second scrutiny exercise included:

- Briefings by service heads
- Desktop review of relevant policies, procedures, complaints and performance information
- Benchmarking
- Work shadowing
- Customer Surveys and Mystery Shopping

The Key Lines of Enquiry SIFT members pursued included:

- What is meant by ‘satisfaction’?
- The Home Standard of the Regulator of Social Housing’s Standards
- Desktop review of relevant policies and procedures
- Reporting process
- Handling process
- Management of repairs service
- Feedback mechanisms to residents and staff
- Monitoring of repairs including performance data
- Use of complaints and compliments to improve service delivery
- Responsive repairs training
- Involvement of customers with developing and setting of targets

## Satisfaction Levels

To enable satisfaction levels to be assessed the question of what is meant by 'satisfaction' must first be addressed. The Business Dictionary defines it as 'Customer level of approval when comparing a product's perceived performance with his or her expectations.' As customer expectations have not been explored with customers an exercise to assess these should be carried out so that appropriate standards of expectation and satisfaction can be achieved.

In exploring the scrutiny question however SIFT felt that there are a number of stages in the execution of a repair. There is the initial request through the Call Centres, then sometimes an inspection, then the actual carrying out of the repair, which includes the interaction with the repairs operative, then the clearing up after the repair has been carried out. Finally the key question would be does the repair **permanently** resolve the initial problem?

During all of these stages 'satisfaction' may vary. The operative may not show their Identification badge or interact well with the customer, but the repair may be carried out well. The interaction may affect the customer's view of satisfaction.

### 3.1 The Regulatory Standard

The Regulatory Framework came into force in April 2012 and although ALMOs are not subject to the Regulatory Framework Local Authorities are. Your Homes Newcastle (YHN) as Newcastle City Council's managing agent would be expected to observe the Regulatory Standards. Applicable to the repairs service are the Home Standard and the Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard. The Home Standard makes particular reference to delivering repairs 'right first time.'

'Registered providers shall provide a cost-effective repairs and maintenance service to homes and communal areas that responds to the needs of, and offers choices to, tenants, and has the objective of completing repairs and improvements right first time.'

The idea of right first time may mean that the repair is carried out in one visit to the tenant's home, where feasible, to the required quality and to the overall satisfaction of the tenant.

YHN currently measures 'completions on first visit', which is essentially the same as 'right first time.' YHN's current performance for 'completions on first visit' stands at 98 percent for the year to date. However, overall customer Satisfaction performance currently stands at 88.51 percent year to date, so is the performance measure of completions on first visit to the satisfaction of the repairs operative or to the satisfaction of the customer? Is the Home Standard being complied with?

### **3.2 The Service Briefing**

Ian Gallagher, Assistant Director Operational Property Services, Emily Potts, Customer Experience and Engagement Manager and Kevin Briggs, Property Services Manager delivered a presentation informing SIFT of the procedures and practices they follow in the Repairs and Maintenance Service.

Ian stated that in September 2018 a 'Transformation Programme' had been put in place so that YHN and Building Commercial Enterprise (BCE) were led by the same organisation, YHN. The programme should help improve the voids and repair services.

Ian informed us that approximately 100,000 repairs are completed a year and that in 2018/19 they have averaged 2,000 satisfaction survey responses to those repairs per month (so 24,000 a year – responses to 24% of repairs).

Customer satisfaction levels surrounding the repairs service are collected by an automated service by YHN using 'Housing Contact'. The automated system contacts customers via telephone then by text message. The system simply asks the customer if they are satisfied or dissatisfied with the repair. The system is impartial, meaning no individual staffs this service.

For monitoring purposes satisfaction is recorded as 'Corrected' and 'Uncorrected'. Ian explained this means that managers may sometimes feel that the customer has hit the wrong key on the telephone – they hit 1 for satisfied and 2 for dissatisfied – and managers then 'correct' the tenant's response. Ian stated that to alleviate this problem the telephone key for dissatisfied was changed to 9, which saw a rise in dissatisfaction levels. The procedure for using corrected and uncorrected feedback will cease in April 2019.

The information gathered by 'Housing Contact' is shared with BCE managers on a monthly basis. Dissatisfied customers are then contacted by management to discuss the customer's experience of the service, but also to agree remedies. It is at this point in the process that satisfaction levels could be 'Corrected.' How valid this approach is maybe questionable.

Under YHN's business strategy, Destination 2022, there is a target in place to achieve satisfaction levels of 95% for repairs. This will provide an opportunity to develop alternative customer satisfaction measures and for more holistic work to be undertaken around customer experience and satisfaction with YHN as a whole and not just some parts of its service.

### **3.3 Benchmarking**

SIFT members explored the Repairs and Maintenance satisfaction levels of seven social landlords to compare and contrast their practices against the activity of YHN and BCE.

Kevin Briggs, Richard Burns and Simon Tuck delivered further briefings to pass along information. In the session we looked into Housemark, Repairs and Maintenance satisfaction benchmarking, YHN performance and STAR (Survey of Tenants and Residents).

#### **Housemark**

Housemark is a nationwide benchmarking company for housing providers. They set standards for how to measure performance and enable members to compare their performance with others. For repairs, Housemark ask members to grade satisfaction in five ways: very satisfied, satisfied, neither, dissatisfied and very dissatisfied.

YHN using Housing Contact only ask tenants if they are satisfied or dissatisfied so they cannot benchmark this aspect of service with Housemark. However by using Housing Contact YHN can ask all repairs and maintenance customers to complete the survey, not just a sample. This measure is known as transactional satisfaction and aims for immediate feedback on the customer's last repair. What is done with all of this information needs to be explored, for example are trends analysed or failures learnt from?

Customers however may feel aggrieved with YHN about all sorts of other matters and may give a dissatisfied response about the repair because of this factor, lending some confusion to performance information.

YHN benchmark their general performance every quarter and compare the performance with their peers. Their peer group come from across the north of England and performance is compared with organisations generally larger in size. YHN use this data to inform service improvements.

#### **STAR (Survey of Tenants and Residents)**

YHN run STAR surveys every year/couple of years and this is sent to a sample of approximately 3,000 to 3,500 customers. Customers are selected to complete the survey based on key characteristics. The survey poses a number of service-related questions, however the question YHN usually asks about repairs is "Generally, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the way YHN deals with repairs and maintenance?" Answer options are a five-point scale and this will bring back different results to the transactional survey.

## SIFT's Benchmarking Exercise

SIFT members explored a range of other organisation's performance in satisfaction with responsive repairs. The table overleaf details six organisation's customer satisfaction levels with repairs.

| Organisation                    | Repairs and Maintenance Satisfaction |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Gentoo (2016/17)                | 86% was previously 71%               |
| South Tyneside Council (2017)   | 80.52% was previously 78.90%         |
| Northumberland Council (2014)   | 81%                                  |
| Plymouth Community Homes (2018) | 89.6%                                |
| Fife Housing Group (2018)       | 84% was previously 73%               |
| Renfrewshire (2017/18)          | 87%                                  |

### 3.4 Work Shadowing

A member of SIFT shadowed a repairs operative as they carried out their day to day activities in two tenants' homes. Repairs that come in through the enquiry centre are handed over to the repairs managers for the different trade areas across the city. They then set out the timescale for the repair and pass the details over to the relevant contractors.

The SIFT member who shadowed the repairs operative wrote, "I went out with a plumber/gas fitter on two repairs and whilst they carried out the repair, I spoke with the customers to establish what repairs they had requested in the past and if they were satisfied with the final outcome. In both cases the customers were satisfied with the repair and the way it was handled. On both repairs I shadowed, the contractor arranged further work to be completed for the customer, before we left the property."

He also wrote:

"I was quite surprise at how short a period of time repairs operatives have to carry out specific jobs and felt that this should be reviewed. I noticed that the repairs operative rang ahead to the next customer to let them know that he was coming; however the phone number was withheld. I know that many people do not answer withheld numbers because they are nervous about who is calling them. I feel that this practice should be reviewed so that telephone numbers are displayed, which will encourage people to answer the call."

### **3.5 Customer Survey**

Members of SIFT originally wanted, as part of their scoping to conduct a Customer Focus Group. Emily Potts, Customer Experience and Engagement Manager agreed to publish SIFT's advert via YHN's various different channels to invite customers to attend our event. Unfortunately no customers volunteered to take part in the Focus Group.

SIFT then had to decide whether to remove the customer involvement from the scoping or to come up with an alternative. We decided to attend each hub across the city and speak with customers as they came in. Members attended Byker, Benwell and Kenton hubs for a two hour period.

The main findings from these surveys are:

- Customers are generally happy with their responsive repairs service
- Staff usually clean up after themselves
- Staff do not always show their ID upon arrival
- Preferred method of contact to customers is predominantly via telephone, closely followed by email and text message
- Customers are not aware of and are not being told about the 'Right to Repairs Scheme'.

### **3.6 Mystery Shopping**

During the investigation SIFT members became aware of the Right to Repair Regulations. There is no mention of the Regulations on Newcastle City Council's website. There is a clause in the tenancy agreement which states:

'We will give you full details of the right to repair scheme including a schedule of the qualifying repairs upon request.'

SIFT members felt that an investigation of this clause was a valid part of the scrutiny exercise and conducted a mystery shopping exercise at three housing hubs.

In hub one staff members present did not know anything about the scheme and told the SIFT member that as they were a tenant of YHN they did not qualify.

In hub two again staff members did not know about the scheme and had to go and look it up on the internet.

A SIFT member telephoned hub three to ask about the scheme. The worker they spoke to was polite and friendly, and initially said that they could find information on the scheme, in their Tenancy Agreement. The SIFT member thanked him for this, and explained that they had already done this, but wanted a more detailed explanation of the scheme, particularly in terms of the amount of daily compensation awarded if a repair is not carried out within a certain period of time.

The worker said that he was not currently able to advise them on the questions they had asked, but totally understood where they were coming from, and that he needed to know this information for himself in case another customer asks him for it again. He then went on to say that he would seek further information and clarification on their questions from some of his colleagues and then get back to the SIFT member as soon as he could. Unfortunately, this has not materialised thus far, despite the SIFT member's numerous attempts of trying to chase it up.

#### **4. Findings**

Every customer who has a repair carried out in their home receives an automated telephone survey. Approximately 20 percent of customers respond to the survey. The performance target for satisfaction is 92 percent, but the current average satisfaction level is 88.13 percent.

The overall level of satisfaction is the only measure used, whereas the different aspects of carrying out the repair are not measured. For example getting the repair right first time, showing identification on entering homes, cleaning up after the work is carried out is not measured.

There has been a 15 percent reduction in the numbers of customers responding to the automated telephone service over a two year period. Should this continue to tail off then the results will not give an accurate picture of satisfaction levels. SIFT members have developed the view that other methods to test satisfaction levels should be explored, for example using online forms or repairs operatives using hand held devices to record the customer's level of satisfaction.

Other than measuring the overall level of satisfaction it is not clear what the data gathered during the Housing Contact telephone calls is used for. How is it queried and what action does it influence? SIFT are unclear about this.

More usefully the questions posed by the automated telephone message could be changed so that the categories of satisfaction could be tested, for example, one question could ask 'did we get it right first time?'

From the work shadowing exercise it is clear that in some instances the timescales and targets given to repair operatives to work to are tight. There are a few repairs which have a low standard minute value, but in most cases the tradesperson is simply required to turn up and complete the work

The scrutiny investigation provided sufficient evidence to confirm that customers are generally satisfied with the responsive repair service. The evidence for this was generated by the customer survey and the performance information.

## Recommendations – Action Plan

| Recommendation   | Management Response | Proposed Actions | Timescale | Responsibility |
|--|---------------------|------------------|-----------|----------------|
| 1. An exercise to assess customers' expectations about the standard of repairs should be conducted |                     |                  |           |                |
| 2. Other methods to test satisfaction levels should be explored                                    |                     |                  |           |                |
| 3. Right first time repairs should be measured to comply with the Home Standard                    |                     |                  |           |                |
| 4. Staff are to be reminded to show their ID to customers upon arrival to complete a repair        |                     |                  |           |                |