

## Housing Ombudsman Service's call for evidence on 'repairing trust' in housing maintenance

### Response as submitted via online survey

#### 1. What region[s] does the landlord operate in? Select all that apply.

- North East
- North West
- Yorkshire and Humber
- **East Midlands**
- **West Midlands**
- **East of England**
- **London**
- South West
- **South East**

#### 2. What contracted arrangements do you have for repairs and maintenance services?

Select all that apply.

- **In-house team**
- **Wholly owned company/DLO**
- **3rd party partnership**
- **3rd party ad-hoc**
- Other (please specify)

#### 3. What are the biggest barriers to working effectively with repairs and maintenance operatives? Select up to 3.

- Communication with operatives
- **Communication with residents**
- Arranging access to property
- Contracted staff turnover
- Availability of operatives
- Geographical spread of homes
- Availability of parts and materials
- Behaviour of contracted operatives
- **Quality of work completed**
- Coordinating work with multiple contractors on complex works
- Relationship management between landlord and contractor
- Other (please specify) **Repeat repairs required due to incomplete works.**

**4. Have you got a code of conduct for contracted staff?**

- **Yes**
- No
- Not sure
- N/A

**5. If yes, how effective do you think it is? 1 being poor performance, 5 being excellent.**

- 1
- 2
- **3**
- 4
- 5

**6. In your opinion, what are the key issues affecting performance management of contracted operatives?**

We work with a number of contractors across our stock areas, varying in both size and specialism. While some provide a great service, and are well reputed within the sector, we've experienced disruption and reputational damage due to some contractor performance.

**How do repairs features in our overall complaints profile?**

In the current financial year, 'reactive repairs relating to contract services' is our number one complaint area, making up around 38% of complaints. By contrast, 'reactive repairs relating to direct services' makes up only 9% of our complaints, fourth overall. This indicates that residents find contracted repairs less satisfactory than in-house services. It's reassuring though that the percentage of repairs reported from June 2023 to April 2024 is proportionate to the overall Southern Housing resident profile; no age, ethnicity or geographical region are raising significantly more or less repairs than others. For example, 3% of our residents are in the Midlands, and 3% of reactive repairs raised relate to the Midlands.

**Our experiences with performance management of contracted operatives**

Our experiences with performance management of contracted operatives have highlighted the critical importance of clarity in contracts, particularly regarding service level agreements and the roles and responsibilities of all parties involved. Residential leases often fail to explicitly and precisely address which party holds responsibility for repairs, leading to varying levels of service delivery that depended heavily on clear definitions of expectations. Ambiguities in leases can act as barriers to effective service delivery, so establishing clear responsibilities is essential. When there is a mutual understanding of roles, it becomes possible to build a service framework that emphasises quality, effective communication, and respect for individuals.

With contracted repair services we've also faced challenges due to a lack of oversight over incoming calls, as contractors had control over logging and management

processes. Effective communication is paramount; ensuring that all parties "do what they say they'll do, when they're supposed to do it" is essential for coordinating efforts and achieving high standards of customer service. If contracts do not incentivise service-oriented KPIs, that limitation remains locked in, hindering overall performance.

### **Key drivers of repairs dissatisfaction**

In the main, we believe issues with contracted operatives mainly relates to the quality of works carried out and communications about these works by the contractor. Internal research we've conducted across all repairs satisfaction has revealed "being kept informed" and dissatisfaction with the "follow up on work required" as the two main areas requiring improvement to reduce the rate of dissatisfaction with repairs.

If there is a complaint about an operative, then we liaise with contract manager or the contractor directly. E.g. if we've received a complaint about a specific operative then we work with contractor to get the operative moved and not working in the geographical area (i.e. the estate) where the complaint originated.

Residents have told us they feel positive towards the operatives and the care taken by them. However, our residents have also told us that they're far less satisfied with professional behaviour in terms of timely and accurate notification and communication from operatives. Contractors not showing up, turning up unannounced or cancelling appointment leads to dissatisfaction as residents have to plan/take time off work to accommodate these appointments.

Common reasons for more than one appointment include:

- A failed appointment (a no show)
- Incorrect tradesperson or specialist
- Work exceeds order so needs variation
- Incorrect parts

Our complaints team often hear the scenario that 'the contractor was polite and tidied up after they did the work, but there was poor communication when it came to arranging the appointment, and the issue wasn't resolved so I've had to start the whole process again'. Ensuring consistent quality of work from contracted operatives is a major challenge. These events lead to frustration for the resident, diminish our reputation and waste resource.

### **Co-creating to repair trust**

We know how much of a difference a good repairs service can make to residents. We want to improve the service they receive and have worked hard with residents to co-create our new approach. Action we've taken – including insourcing – has focused on resolving longstanding issues the organisation and our residents have experienced. That we needed to take this action indicates the widespread issues we've had with contracted operatives. There was a notable difference in the satisfaction of repairs based on legacy organisation, with a 29% difference in satisfaction rates between the two. Given the main difference is the contracts we held, this only emphasised to us how important it is

to get contracts right. Merger has allowed us to do this. We not only have a new resident involvement structure to facilitate co-creation, but we're also in a better position to negotiate contracts.

We know we haven't always met residents' expectations when it comes to repairs, and we believe our in-house teams are best placed to make the improvements we want to see to our repair services. So in some of our regions, we've moved our repairs service in-house. We're confident this change will improve the quality and responsiveness of the repairs we deliver to affected residents. The way residents report their repairs won't change, but the calls will now be handled by our team. We know things won't change overnight and we'll need to work through the outstanding issues with existing repairs from the previous contractor.

When it came to the process of selecting a new contractor to deliver repairs and maintenance services to our homes in London, we made the decision with residents. Residents were involved in approving the questions and scoring the organisations. This meant the final decision was based on the lived experiences of residents as well as the technical knowledge of our colleagues. As with the regions where we've in-sourced, our residents will now be able to raise and schedule their repair using their online account or call our repair contact centre.

Whilst many of the same challenges will exist, the advantage of an inhouse team is the ability to streamline communication channels. We don't necessarily have this right yet, but through our integration, this will become better. We also in theory will be more agile in meeting resident needs as we don't have a commercial contract in the way.

We are also currently facing challenges with the contractor market itself. There has been a noticeable decrease in the number of Tier 1 contractors with the necessary infrastructure to handle our substantial volume of work. This scarcity has led us to increasingly rely on smaller, less experienced contractors who require more intensive management. This is especially the case for stand-alone projects, where turning to smaller firms requires greater oversight on our part. Although we are confident that this situation is temporary, it presents a challenge for us and similar RPs of our size in the immediate term. We're working to address these issues and maintain high standards of service delivery despite the current market constraints.