How to...

use technology to improve responsive repairs

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Introduction

Over the last decade the pace of change in technology has been momentous. A seismic shift has occurred in the way consumers interact and communicate with each other, with a surge in the numbers with access to smart phones and the web. Landlords need to recognise and respond to these changes and capitalise on the benefits of new technology in the delivery of repairs services. The two key drivers are:

• delivering value for money: modern technology will contribute to the delivery of cost efficient, value for money repairs services
• delivering customer driven services: responding to changing demand in order to meet customer expectations and maintain levels of satisfaction.

The CIH Repairs charter for housing

The new national policy and regulatory framework gives landlords greater freedom to deliver services that reflect local priorities, and are right for you and your customers. The CIH Repairs charter for housing encourages sector led improvement, and specifically refers to the use of effective technology. It states:

‘We have reliable and flexible IT systems, with real time integration which manage the critical flow of information to support the business, and enable us to meet customer expectations in relation to direct reporting, appointing and tracking of repairs via their preferred method of contact (for example the internet or smart phone).’

This ‘How to…’ is the fourth in a series written to compliment the Repairs: CIH charter for housing. It will help landlords consider how the use of innovative technology and business solutions can help to meet the increasing demands of customers to deliver an effective responsive repairs service.

Know the market

Historically the market consumption of cutting edge technologies is led by individual consumers, followed by private businesses, with public sector organisations the last to embrace innovations in the workplace. However, this time lag is shortening and there are already a number of solutions on the market that can meet the challenges of delivering an effective repairs service. The right IT solution will support you to deliver each stage of the process as effectively and efficiently as possible whilst at the same time meeting customers’ expectations. However, for many landlords the specification, implementation and maintenance of systems with real time integration can be challenging. Critically landlords need clarity around their business requirements and to understand their customers’ expectations to maximise the usefulness and functionality of these systems.

Know your customer

Enquiries regarding repairs are the single biggest reason customers contact their landlords. Repairs services are also subject to the most scrutiny. Inevitably today’s customers compare the services provided by their landlord to those they receive from other services and private sector organisations. Today, customers want to access their landlord’s services at different times of the day and in ways that suit their needs, and to agree appointment times that are convenient for them.

Whilst current tenants’ demographics indicate lower levels of IT literacy this situation is also changing. New and future tenants are increasingly expert users of social media, no longer use email, and present an immediate and growing demand for smart communications. Social landlords need to be
responsive, and challenge themselves to transform how they communicate and deliver services to customers.

We already know:
• texting is the most common method of communication among the population
• social media is now common place (for example Twitter and Facebook)
• the use of smart phone apps is growing
• most recent generations consider email ‘old fashioned’.

Consider:
• how texting, your website and social media can be used to report repairs and enquiries; confirm/rearrange appointments; provide job progress/updates; enable job tracking; gather satisfaction feedback
• encouraging ‘online chat’ through contact centres
• extending the use of desk top phones with video links
• ensuring all staff are easily and directly contactable. Question why ‘gatekeeping’ arrangements exist, as these can create delays and increase opportunity for error/failure. However, this needs to be sensibly balanced, with staff encouraged to switch off devices at appropriate times to maintain a healthy work life balance
• maximising the use of devices such as smart phones, PDAs (otherwise known as palm top computers) and tablets to improve home/mobile working arrangements
• preparing to receive messages sent via smart TVs (expected 2013).

Learning from others

Sovereign Housing Association has launched a new self service portal to enable customers to access services on-line. Customers are able to report and check on the progress of a repair, view any planned work that has been scheduled, and view information about their gas service date.

Contact: Debbie Humm, Head of Sovereign Connect

The use of texting and social media can deliver cost efficiencies for landlords, where used appropriately. However, it is important to ensure that these do not duplicate traditional communications, which will result in any efficiencies being lost. Use customer insight to target ‘single method contact’.

Johnny Johnson Housing Trust operate an automated telephone system, called Tickle, to gather customer satisfaction with repairs, within a couple of hours of them being completed. Customers are asked only one question which requires them to answer a simple yes or no. Results are mapped to a webpage in real-time. Feedback volume and satisfaction has increased, and repairs costs reduced.

Contact: Jim Lunney jim@jjhousing.co.uk

Develop your vision

Key to the successful implementation of any business solution is establishing the business case – be clear from the outset what you wish to achieve. A variety of technology solutions already exist to enable landlords to operate differently, but changes should not be rushed or made without appropriate consideration at strategic and operational levels. Critically landlords need to understand their business requirements and customer expectations to maximise the usefulness and functionality of any IT system.

Things to consider:
• introduce new technologies alongside a review of existing repairs processes which challenges existing customs and practices
• map out existing business processes and review these with customers to create the future service vision and priorities
• identify existing waste and duplication of processes
• identify ‘touch points’ – where repairs processes or functions interact with other service areas, such as lettings or voids. Avoid looking at repairs functions in isolation.

When looking to implement a business solution the specification should:
• set out your overall vision
• take account of customer insight information
• identify the areas that will be the easiest to implement but will deliver the biggest impact
• set a realistic timetable - allow sufficient time for design, development, testing and training
• ensure effective risk management
• maintain transparency and customer accountability.

Be bold - don’t step back into yesterday’s world

There is a trend to bring repairs services back in-house. If this is considered, avoid creating a repairs service that looks and feels like the previous in-house service you used to manage. Many previous practices are no longer relevant, and technologies may have advanced significantly during the time the service was outsourced. Work with your customers to agree your service priorities and use these to determine the settings for any dynamic working solutions or technology you choose to adopt for the future.

Learning from others

In 2011 Community Housing Group undertook a review of their responsive repairs service. As part of the service modernisation, Community HG introduced a comprehensive mobile working package that incorporates dynamic scheduling of appointments and automatic stock management linked directly to operatives PDAs.

Contact: Bill Baker via Fiona.law@communityhg.com

Mobile working arrangements

Mobile working is now widely accepted within the sector. Early glitches with devices have generally been overcome, and where geographical coverage used to be an issue there are now off-line solutions available. However, it is important to recognise that technology is only part of a successful mobile working arrangement. Repair scheduling software and hand-held technology supports this but significant change to organisational culture and working practices are necessary to deliver benefits in full. These include:
• faster mobilisation of operatives, increasing productivity and efficiency
• local mobilisation of operatives, saving on travel costs and time
• improved customer service.

Where possible, harmonise operatives’ working day to match that of the call handling staff and call centre opening times. This will help manage reporting peaks and troughs, and reduce costs associated with repairs reported after 4pm. Successful implementation will require:
• careful planning and engagement of staff in the development of solutions
• a thorough training and induction programme for all operatives
• focused support to supervisors and managers whose apprehensions can prevent a successful roll-out
• identifying champions to support others
• robust testing
• confidence to utilise all of the software functions to realise optimum efficiencies and productivity
• avoiding the temptation to run duplicate paper systems
• empowerment of operatives to self-diagnose repairs on arrival; be responsible for direct materials ordering; make appointments with customer onsite for any new or follow up works as necessary.

Learning from others

Community Gateway Association are working with Sector on a project to bring the organisations repairs service back in house. Gateway PropertyCare has been chosen as the name for this service and will launch in April 2013. As a Community Gateway organisation, customers are at the heart of the decision making process, and have been involved at every stage of the procurement process. A full review has taken place of all of the repairs related business processes, this has included job scheduling, mobile working and real-time performance management tools.

Contact: Louise Mattinson louise.mattinson@communitygateway.co.uk

Merlin Housing Society has undergone significant transition since transferring from South Gloucestershire Council. New technology introduced successfully includes PDAs, trackers on company vehicles and Opti Time for dynamic scheduling.

Contact: Dan Dowling, Operations Manager

Using real time information

Customers increasingly expect their landlord to have ‘real time information’ at their fingertips – enabling them to arrange a convenient appointment time or immediate agreement of times for any follow up work required. Access to real time information, such as property attributes, repair history and customer profile information also underpins modern technology solutions such as job scheduling, mobile and repairs ‘apps’. The benefits of using real time information include:
• cost efficiencies derived from paperless systems
• identification of repairs within warranty periods
• improved ability for operatives to plan for stock parts/spares based on property attribute information
• provision of immediate and accurate information to customers
• reduced duplication of data held within IT and paper based systems
• preventing the accumulation of time consuming administrative backlogs
• reduced risk of error at data input/transfer stage.

Job scheduling tools

Job scheduling tools provide accurate real time information to call handlers, enabling appointments to be made to suit the customer at the first point of contact. The job scheduling tool will then automatically ‘push/allocate’ the jobs out to relevant operatives’ mobile devices, without the need for any paper based job ticketing.

Benefits of job scheduling solutions include:
• improved customer service - call handlers are able to arrange convenient appointments with customers at the first point of contact, which can be followed up with an automated text message
• driving value for money and maximising available resources by allocating jobs efficiently, eliminating waste and duplication of processes
• improved operative productivity, reducing time spent on travel and parts management
• providing accurate measures of ‘time taken’ to complete each repair by individual operatives
• reduced back office staffing costs and associated overheads
• increased operative productivity, reducing overall staffing costs
• supporting mobile working arrangements
• an improved health and safety environment for operatives by embedding risk assessment into PDAs, for example: the completion of vehicle safety checks; alerting operatives to traditional risk warnings associated with an individual property or resident
• adding value: operatives can use PDAs to complete additional, non-traditional repairs functions, for example: updating customer contact records; updating information on occupants; gathering customer insight information
• making real time information available to enhance quality assurance and post inspection processes.

Some landlords choose to operate ‘one job at a time scheduling’ which only triggers the pushing of a new job to the operative when they become available. Benefits include the elimination of ‘cherry picking’ of repairs, and removing the risk of backlogs if one job takes longer to complete than expected.

The successful implementation of job scheduling relies on the following factors:
• be honest about operatives’ skill sets. Err on the side of caution; start with an operative’s primary skill set. Only build capacity into the system for secondary/multi skills when you are satisfied with the operatives competency
• periodically review Schedule of Rates and Standard Minute Values as this drives time allocated for appointments
• understand and manage van stock profiles to ensure you only carry the parts you need, complete a quarterly review to factor in seasonal trends.

The challenge to be bold: bring your own device to work

The current market for consumer technology means that many staff will have access to their own personal devices, such as smart phones and tablets that are far more modern and up to date than those provided within the workplace. Landlords should consider allowing staff to use their own devices in the workplace to deliver improved efficiencies.

Advantages:
• staff’s own devices are likely to be more advanced/up to date than those supplied by employer
• reduced number of devices needed to be purchased resulting in cost savings
• more convenience for staff who don’t have to carry multiple devices everywhere
• reduces hidden activity as staff will use devices anyway for non business activity, so less time is rectifying IT problems caused as a consequence.

Things to consider:
• making an allowance for staff using their own devices (similar to tool allowances)
• how to maintain devices in a structured manner to reduce security risks, and cost appropriately
• robust security policies and procedures around the use of personal devices are needed.

Repairs apps

Recently the use of repairs apps, which allow customers to report a repair and send an image of the issue they are reporting to assist with diagnosis, has been increasing. The benefits of apps also include overcoming any language or communication barriers for customers who may find it difficult to communicate over the phone.

Learning from others

Knowsley Housing Trust and Mosscare Housing Group have developed a smart phone app designed to enable residents to report repairs at any time of the day or night, with facilities to attach a photograph to assist diagnosis.

Contact: Sharon Steele, Knowsley Housing Trust or Grace Hughes, Mosscare Housing Group
Working with you to deliver the CIH Repairs Charter through the effective use of technology.

Sector are currently working with Community Gateway Association based in Preston, to bring the repairs service in-house. Sector is providing project management support to ensure that the solution delivers against their business requirements.

We bring added value to projects like this, as we have deep expertise in respect of technical support, HR support, and an understanding of performance management to ensure that the service is proactive rather than reactive, helping to break down the traditional barriers that still exist within this service area.

Our experience will enable you to deliver an excellent service whether it is through:

- A comprehensive review of your current business processes, which we can do not just for repairs but across all your services
- Procurement of solutions to support your service delivery
- Support during the implementation of solutions ensuring that you maximise the opportunities that innovative technologies provide
- Work with you to ensure that the customer is at the forefront of service delivery, for example, via the use of job scheduling tools, the use of social media
- Ensuring that you have the right structures and levels of support to deliver an efficient and effective service
- Help you achieve VFM e.g. through e. trading opportunities

For more information please contact:
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www.sector-group.com
Useful resources and information

Equality and diversity: CIH charter for housing
www.cih.org/equalityanddiversitycharter

How to... build skills and capacity in repairs services
www.cih.org/publication-free/display/vpathDCR/templatedata/cih/publication-free/data/How_to_build_skills_and_capacity_in_repairs_services

How to... deliver value for money repairs services
www.cih.org/publication-free/display/vpathDCR/templatedata/cih/publication-free/data/How_to_deliver_value_for_money_repairs_services

Practice online
www.cih.org/practiceonline

Improving Repairs and Maintenance Services (2008) CIH
www.cih.org/publication/display/vpathDCR/templatedata/cih/publication/data/Improving_Repairs_and_Maintenance_Services

Managing Voids: Letting Homes (2009) CIH
www.cih.org/publication/display/vpathDCR/templatedata/cih/publication/data/Managing_Voids_Letting_Homes

Regulatory Framework for Social Housing (2012) HCA
www.homesandcommunities.co.uk/ourwork/regulatory-framework

CIH in partnership with CIOB have developed a range of qualifications to support the development of skills in the sector for full details visit:
www.cih.org/distancelearningcourses

For details of all CIH repairs and maintenance training courses visit:
www.cih.org/training?&topic=gqfbw5s

More detailed case study information for each of the examples referred to in this briefing can be found in our Repairs charter online network. For more information visit: www.cih.org/repairscharter