

Executive summary - Review of communal repairs

Background and context

Mhs homes (mhs) is the largest non-registered social landlord in the UK. It owns and manages almost 9,000 homes in Kent and employs around 250 people. Heart of Medway Housing Association, an 800+ unit Registered Provider with charitable status, develops all new grant-funded housing developments for management by mhs. Mhs's office and the Repairs Depot are both in Chatham.

Mhs spends around £12m per year to maintain homes and estates. Of this, just under £2m is spent on day to day (responsive) repairs delivered both inside tenant's homes and in communal areas. In 2017/18, 16,000 day-to-day works were carried out, of which 12% were repairs in communal areas. Between 1 April and 31 January 2019, 13,500 repairs were completed of which 7% were in communal areas.

The Assistant Director of Asset Management has the overall operational responsibility for the delivery of all property related repairs and maintenance services, including capital projects, cyclical and planned programmes, repairs to properties that become empty (voids), health and safety compliance and day-to-day repairs.

The Assistant Director of Customer Services has the overall operational responsibility for the delivery of non-repair aspects of landlord services to residents, including the frontline service delivered by the Customer Service Team that handles incoming calls, emails and internet enquiries from customers.

A significant majority of routine communal repairs are carried out by the Repairs Team that is based at the Royal Eagles Close depot in Chatham. The 30 Repairs Operatives have vans with tracking devices and carry a stock of most commonly used parts. Some operatives are 'multi-skilled', meaning that they can carry out a range of jobs within a particular type of work; some have skills in a range of different trades, and some specialise in specific trades. Schedulers based at the Repairs Depot are responsible for the smooth running of the appointment system and tracking jobs. Repairs Operatives receive details of each job via a hand-held IT device. This enables schedulers to check progress on jobs and contact residents, for example if operatives cannot get access to a property, reschedule appointments or let them know if an operative is running late. Further jobs are passed to Repairs Operatives after they complete each repair.

External contractors carry out works relating to health and safety compliance, maintenance of mechanical and engineering plants and gas heating breakdowns, servicing and boiler replacements. All property-related contracts are managed by the Quality and Property Compliance Team.

The Handyperson carries out minor communal repairs such as fitting gate padlocks, painting safety-line steps and removing graffiti where possible.

The in-house 30 Grounds Maintenance Operatives, Caretakers and Cleaners have recently transferred to the Assets Team.

Repairs are reported to the Customer Service Team that operates from 8am to 6pm during weekdays and from 8.30 to 2pm on Saturdays. The Customer Services Team confirm the location of the problem and diagnose the repair. Depending on the type of work, jobs are passed to either the Quality, Performance and Compliance Team, the Handyperson or to Schedulers. The same telephone number is used by customers reporting emergency repairs during out of office hours. The Customer Service Team handled 73,400 calls between April 2018 and March 2019. Of these, 47% related to repairs and asset management. In addition, customers can call specified external contractors directly to report breakdown of boilers and lifts.

Summary of findings

Key strengths

- a. The overall quality of information about mhs' repair responsibilities is good. The wide-ranging ways to report repairs works well and a single team is responsible for handling the initial process of diagnosing and passing jobs to different sections in the Asset Management Team. Frontline staff are customer-focussed, tailoring services where possible to meet individual needs and are well trained in using the IT system to record issues and raise repairs.
- b. Working relationships between various teams are positive and demonstrate a high level of customer care. Opportunities are taken to identify major works through responsive repairs. The procedures for identifying defects and recalls work well.
- c. A considerable strength is the awareness of senior staff about shortcomings in the communal repairs service and a clear willingness to make improvements. Capacity has been created for a dedicated resource to help more robustly monitor performance and provide strong insight from data.
- d. There is appetite across all teams we met to work more closely with the corporate Health and Safety lead to more robustly identify and monitor risks, for example through estate inspections and routine sampling of repairs jobs to continually test risk management processes. This would help to provide clear direction and instructions about jobs that might appear to be 'minor works' but could pose serious risks to vulnerable individuals, such as replacement of internal light bulbs and trip hazards.
- e. The bringing together of the Caretaking Team into the Assets Team presents an excellent opportunity to create a more joined up approach to dealing with minor communal repairs. A review of caretaking arrangements might help to reduce the over-reliance on the single Handyperson, a service that is especially valued by customers. If the current backlog and workloads are not assessed there is a danger that

non-priority jobs could become 'urgent' and pose potential health and safety issue and the very positive feedback about the Handyperson Service from residents is likely to reduce.

Key areas for improvement

- a. The changes that are underway to refresh the website presents mhs with the opportunity to provide dedicated information about communal repairs, deal with house-keeping issues and improve functionality for reporting and checking progress on communal jobs. In addition, target timescales for communal repairs should be clarified and published.
- b. Although long-term maintenance issues are identified and work is done, there is a lack of attention to informing site-based staff and residents about the specification, how long the work will take, how the programme will be executed and the service that residents can expect.
- c. Customer engagement and feedback systems are poor. There are no discernible outcomes from formal groups, routine customer feedback about repairs focusses on repairs done inside people's homes. There has been no investigation into the lack of complaints about communal repairs when residents are anecdotally complaining about long delivery times. This suggests that mhs is not concerned about extended delivery delays in this area. The feedback from residents about the overall repairs service is positive, however, there is much unhappiness about communal repairs. Examples include jobs being 'ignored' if they are open for long periods and follow-on work is left unattended for long periods.
- d. The most significant weakness is that ownership of communal repairs falls between three different teams with each using different approaches to record and progress jobs. Although data is available monitoring and evaluation is not robust enough to know how well the service is working overall and the performance of each team.

As agreed with the CSP, service ratings are classified using a five-point scale of Great, Very Good, Good, Adequate, Unclassified. The overall judgement included is based on the agreed scope and based on the overall balance of strengths and weaknesses. Judgements reflect the seriousness of weaknesses as agreed by the CSP. Service ratings are on a five-point scale: Great, Very good, Good, Adequate or Unclassified.

The overall assessment for the communal repairs service is 'Adequate', based on the following key themes considered:

Theme	Rating
Provision of information for customers	Adequate
Arranging repairs	Adequate
Meeting diverse needs	Good
Protecting people	Adequate
Customer influence	Adequate
Performance management	Adequate
Overall rating	Adequate

Recommendations

Below is a list of all the recommendations:

Priority	Recommendations
FUNDAMENTAL Fundamental control weaknesses, which expose the Company to a high degree of unnecessary risk	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Assign the overall responsibility for monitoring communal repairs to a single manager and ensure that performance is monitored for end-to-end processes, including reasons for job close-downs, variations, pre and post inspections and defects 2. Introduce robust processes and systems to capture risks, how they are managed, monitored, evaluated and reported 3. Clearly set out priorities for communal repairs 4. Consider the position with jobs that are not the landlord's responsibility from a risk perspective, inform staff and take appropriate action to mitigate and manage risks
SIGNIFICANT Significant control weaknesses which expose the Company to a moderate degree of unnecessary risk.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. Clarify target times for completion of communal repairs, ensure these are communicated to customers and monitor performance 6. Consider approach to repairs recharges 7. Significantly improve information for customers and liaison with site-based staff before, during and after planned projects are carried out 8. Review arrangements for consulting and involving residents, both formally and informally, including getting feedback through surveys and complaints 9. Maximise the use of all resources in the Assets Team, including caretakers

HOUSEKEEPING

Areas where we have highlighted opportunities to implement a good or better practice, to improve efficiency or further reduce exposure to risk. Such issues are raised directly with management and are not listed within this report.

10. Review website information
11. Progress website functionality
12. Re-launch the use of notice boards to convey information to scheme residents about repairs raised and progress