Chartered Institute of Housing

CIH response to the Housing Ombudsman 'Repairing Trust' call for evidence

Executive summary and overview of our response

Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH) is the independent voice for housing and the home of professional standards. Our goal is simple – to provide housing professionals and their organisations with the advice, support, and knowledge they need. CIH is a registered charity and not-for-profit organisation. This means that the money we make is put back into the organisation and funds the activities we carry out to support the housing sector. We are a registered charity with a Royal Charter, which means that our work is always focused on the public interest. We have a diverse membership of people who work in both the public and private sectors in 20 countries on five continents across the world. Further information is available at www.cih.org.

This consultation response was prepared following our work with CIH members, key stakeholders, and the National Housing Federation (NHF). It draws on insights and evidence from projects such as the Rethinking Repairs and Maintenance (RERAM) project, the Better Social Housing Review (BSHR), and sector preparation for Awaab's Law. These initiatives reflect the work done across the social housing sector to improve maintenance, resident engagement, and safety standards. In our engagement, members and stakeholders have highlighted ongoing challenges like rising costs, skills shortages, and changing legislative demands. Despite this, providers are adapting to improve service delivery and safety, as shown in the case studies.

This consultation response addresses the Housing Ombudsman's call for evidence on housing maintenance under the theme of 'repairing trust.' Our response draws from three key strands: (1) Equitable outcomes in repairs, (2) Sector preparation for Awaab's Law, and (3) Operational improvements from RERAM.

1. Equitable outcomes in Repairs

The sector continues to face challenges in delivering fair and inclusive repairs services, particularly for vulnerable and marginalised groups such as Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) residents, those with disabilities, and residents living in poor-quality housing. Damp and mould disproportionately affect these groups, posing health risks and exacerbating dissatisfaction, and government data highlights disparities in repair outcomes for vulnerable groups, reinforcing the need for equitable service delivery. However, evidence from the Rethinking Repairs and Maintenance (RERAM) project and the Better Social Housing Review (BSHR) highlights the ways that housing providers are embedding resident feedback and prioritising equitable service delivery. Case studies,

such as those from LiveWest, Bolton at Home, and Ashton Pioneer Homes, demonstrate how resident-centred approaches can improve service fairness and satisfaction.

2. Sector preparation for Awaab's Law

Awaab's Law introduces statutory repair timelines and record-keeping requirements to address health hazards such as damp and mould. The sector has been preparing for these new obligations by upgrading systems, training staff, and improving communication with residents. However, many landlords face challenges related to resource constraints and skills shortages as well as awaiting final clarification once the law is enacted. Case studies from Midland Heart, South Liverpool Homes, and Sutton Housing Partnership illustrate how housing providers can respond proactively to these changes by improving systems, processes, and resident engagement.

3. Operational improvements from RERAM

RERAM has identified operational improvements as a key area for addressing repair service delays and inefficiencies. Empowering operatives with real-time decision-making authority, better communication, and diagnostic tools can help improve first-time fix rates and overall service efficiency. Examples from St Leger Homes, the London Borough of Havering, and L&Q highlight how these principles can be implemented to improve resident satisfaction and service outcomes.

Alignment with the Housing Ombudsman's call for evidence

Our response addresses the four key themes of the Ombudsman's call for evidence:

1. **Contracting issues:** Landlords face challenges related to contractor performance, accountability, and skills shortages. RERAM's guiding principles promote long-term, collaborative partnerships to improve outcomes.
2. **Resident experiences:** Disrepair issues, especially damp and mould, disproportionately affect vulnerable groups. The BSHR and RERAM highlight the importance of resident involvement and feedback in driving improvements, particularly in communication and repair delivery.
3. **Barriers for operatives:** Empowering operatives with the tools, resources, and decision-making authority is crucial for improving service delivery.
4. **Lessons from successful initiatives:** Key lessons from the sector include the importance of resident feedback, real-time decision-making by operatives, and collaboration between landlords, contractors, and residents.

Through both case studies and sector-wide insights, we have reviewed how social landlords can address the key challenges in housing maintenance, build trust with

residents, and improve service delivery in response to the Ombudsman's themes for this spotlight report.

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Introduction

Context and purpose

The Chartered Institute of Housing's (CIH) response to the Housing Ombudsman's call for evidence is structured around three key themes that align with the call's focus on contracting issues, resident experience, operational barriers, and lessons from successful initiatives. This response draws from CIH's extensive work in collaboration with its members and stakeholders, alongside sector-wide insights provided by the Rethinking Repairs and Maintenance (RERAM) project and the Better Social Housing Review (BSHR). The response demonstrates how social landlords are addressing the challenges of maintaining resident trust through more equitable, efficient, and resident-centred repairs services.

The social housing sector is currently facing wider challenges such as rising costs, skills shortages, and compliance with new regulatory and legal requirements. These pressures are impacting providers' ability to invest in repairs and meet statutory obligations, while balancing financial constraints and workforce limitations. In its latest Sector Risk Profile, the Regulator of Social Housing has emphasised that the sector is currently spending record amounts on repairs and maintenance, with expenditure forecast to amount to £50 billion over the next five years. Despite this, the evidence we have gathered shows that housing associations and local authorities are adapting and adopting solutions to improve service delivery, resident satisfaction, and safety, improvements that are reflected in the case studies used within this response.

The evidence is presented through three main strands:

1. **Equitable outcomes in Repairs:** Exploring how repairs services are delivered more fairly, particularly for vulnerable and marginalised groups, such as Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities and residents with disabilities. This includes focusing on damp and mould, which has been found to disproportionately affect these groups.

2. **Sector preparation for Awaab's Law:** Evaluating how landlords are preparing for the statutory timelines and compliance obligations of Awaab's Law, which requires addressing health hazards like damp and mould promptly.

3. **Operational improvements:** Assessing operatives' barriers to delivering repair services and how better coordination, tools, and decision-making authority can improve efficiency and effectiveness.

While these three strands form the core structure of our response, they are also aligned with the four key themes outlined in the Housing Ombudsman's call for evidence:

1. **Challenges in contracting services:**
   The response highlights landlords' difficulties, including market volatility, skills shortages, and contractor accountability. Evidence from RERAM underscores the importance of developing long-term, collaborative partnerships to ensure service consistency and quality.

2. **Problems residents encounter with services:**
   Residents, particularly those from vulnerable groups, often experience delays, poor communication, and inequitable treatment in repairs. The BSHR and RERAM emphasise the need for proactive resident engagement and the inclusion of feedback to resolve these issues, ensuring more responsive services.

3. **Barriers faced by operatives:**
   Operatives encounter challenges such as poor coordination, limited decision-making authority, and a lack of real-time information. RERAM's guiding principles promote empowering operatives with the tools and autonomy needed to resolve issues on-site, leading to quicker and more effective repairs.

4. **Lessons learned from successful initiatives:**
   Our response draws lessons from successful initiatives, illustrating how investments in resident engagement, technology, communication, and empowering operatives have resulted in more efficient service delivery and higher levels of resident satisfaction.

To deliver timely and high-quality repairs services, collaboration between landlords, contractors, residents, and operatives is essential. The principles and initiatives identified through RERAM and BSHR demonstrate how the sector can address these challenges whilst working towards improving resident satisfaction, ensuring compliance, and building trust. This response provides practical insights into addressing these key issues and fostering a culture of continuous improvement in repairs services.

1. Equitable outcomes in repairs

Ensuring repairs services are delivered equitably, particularly for vulnerable and marginalised groups, is a central concern in both the Rethinking Repairs and Maintenance (RERAM) project and the Better Social Housing Review (BSHR). The evidence from these initiatives highlights the disparities in services provided to different resident groups, with issues like damp and mould disproportionately affecting Black, Asian, and minority ethnic (BAME) communities, disabled residents, and those living in poor-quality housing. In addition to these challenges, it is important to recognise that leaseholders also face distinct issues, particularly around communication and accountability in service provision. Ensuring equitable outcomes in repairs requires understanding and addressing the diverse needs of all residents, including both tenants and leaseholders, to deliver more inclusive services.

Key challenges

One of the most significant challenges identified in RERAM and BSHR is the uneven service provision in social housing repairs. Residents from vulnerable groups often experience longer waiting times, less frequent follow-up, and lower-quality repairs. Evidence from the English Housing Survey on the social rented sector, based on census definitions of ethnicity and disability and the Household Reference Person,[1] and compiled by CIH shows that:

- 3.5 per cent of social rented households with a white household reference person have a Category 1 Housing Health and Safety Rating System (HHSRS) hazard fail, compared to 6.4 per cent of social rented households with an ethnic minority household reference person.
- 3.5 per cent of social rented households without a disabled household reference person have a Category 1 HHSRS hazard fail, compared to 4.4 per cent of social rented households with a disabled household reference person.
- 4.7 per cent of social rented households with a white household reference person live in a damp home, compared to 8.5 per cent of social rented households with an ethnic minority household reference person.
- 11.4 per cent of social rented households with a white household reference person agreed with the statement 'I do not feel safe at home because I fear that a fire may break out', compared to 13.6 per cent of social rented households with an ethnic minority household reference person.
- 16.7 per cent of social rented households with a white household reference person reported being dissatisfied with their current accommodation, compared to 22.9

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[1] Household Reference Persons (HRPs) are defined as an individual person within a household who acts as a reference point for producing further derived statistics and for characterising a whole household according to characteristics of the chosen reference person.

per cent of social rented households with an ethnic minority household reference person.

- 13.8 per cent of social rented households without a disabled household reference person reported being dissatisfied with their current accommodation, compared to 21.2 per cent of social rented households with a disabled household reference person.

Other evidence suggests the English Housing Survey data is not an outlier. For example, survey data produced by the Resolution Foundation found that people from Pakistani or Bangladeshi, black, or mixed/multiple ethnic groups were much more likely to be living in poor quality housing compared to their white counterparts. The Resolution Foundation also found that disabled people were disproportionately likely to be living in poor quality housing.

Often, therefore, these residents live in homes with persistent issues like damp and mould, leading to long-term health risks and reduced quality of life. Responding to these challenges has been a core focus of CIH's work linked to the Better Social Housing Review:

- **BSHR recommendation three:** highlights the importance of addressing health-related repairs. This recommendation stresses the need for landlords to prioritise vulnerable groups' needs and improve the speed and quality of repairs in these cases.
- **BSHR recommendation five**: highlights the importance of working with residents to ensure they have a voice, and influence, right through organisations. This is reflected in the National Housing Federation's updated Resident Charter developed in close collaboration with the Resident Advisory Panel as part of their Together With Tenants work.
- **RERAM's guiding principles three and four** focus on tackling discrimination and ensuring inclusivity in repairs services. These principles emphasise the need for landlords to understand which groups are receiving less favourable services and actively work towards equitable outcomes.

The BSHR and RERAM project therefore provides a strategic framework for addressing these disparities by promoting a culture shift in how repairs services are delivered. Its guiding principles also encourage landlords to make every contact count by actively listening to residents and promptly addressing their concerns. This approach aims to foster trust between residents and landlords and create a more inclusive service delivery model.

Good practice from our research and engagement

- **Resident-centred approaches**: Ensuring residents are actively involved in shaping repair services is crucial for achieving equitable outcomes. By consistently seeking feedback, particularly from vulnerable groups, housing providers can better understand service gaps and prioritise repairs that significantly impact resident wellbeing. This engagement also helps build trust and improves the overall resident experience.
- **Proactive and inclusive engagement**: Proactively engaging residents, especially those less likely to participate in traditional feedback methods, is essential. Housing providers can employ diverse communication methods, including face-to-face interactions, digital platforms, and community engagement initiatives, to ensure all residents can easily report repairs and feel heard. Inclusive engagement ensures that the voices of marginalised and vulnerable groups are amplified, leading to more responsive and fairer repairs services.
- **Tailored responses to vulnerable groups**: Different resident groups have varied needs, and repair services must reflect this. Tailoring responses for vulnerable residents—such as those with disabilities, living in poor-quality housing, or at risk of health hazards—ensures that these groups receive prompt and effective repairs. Personalising services helps address longstanding inequalities in the delivery of repairs, particularly for those most affected by issues like damp and mould.
- **Improving communication and transparency**: Clear and regular communication between housing providers and residents is essential to managing expectations and ensuring transparency throughout the repairs process. Keeping residents informed of the status of their repairs and providing clarity on timelines reduces complaints and increases satisfaction, particularly for complex or long-term issues. Improved communication channels help residents feel more confident in the service being provided.
- **Data-driven decision-making**: Using data effectively to monitor performance and resident satisfaction is critical to identifying and addressing inequities in repair services. By leveraging feedback data, housing providers can target areas where services fall short, ensuring that resources are allocated where they are needed most. This data-driven approach allows providers to make informed decisions that lead to fairer, more inclusive repairs services.
- **Collaboration and partnerships**: Collaborating with external partners, such as local agencies, contractors, and community organisations, can help address deeper systemic issues and provide a more holistic approach to repairs. These partnerships enable housing providers to draw on additional expertise and resources, leading to more comprehensive solutions for residents, particularly those facing complex challenges like building safety and health risks.

In summary, this evidence aligns closely with the Ombudsman's focus on the problems residents face, especially communication gaps, unresolved complaints, and service inequities. Landlords could address these issues by implementing RERAM and BSHR

recommendations, reducing resident dissatisfaction and improving equitable access to repairs.

Lessons learned

Case study: [LiveWest](#)
LiveWest's resident-led InFocus Group was instrumental in scrutinising the organisation's repairs processes and highlighting areas for improvement. The group focused on the needs of vulnerable residents, including those affected by health hazards like damp and mould. As a result of their feedback, LiveWest streamlined its appointment scheduling process and improved communication with residents, leading to quicker repairs and a reduction in complaints.

Case study: [Bolton at Home](#)
Bolton at Home partnered with RECLAIM to create a Youth Scrutiny Panel to engage young residents in reviewing their repairs services. The panel identified repairs as a top priority, scrutinised policies, and provided feedback to make the repairs process clearer and more accessible. Key changes included making the policy visually easier for neurodiverse residents and offering translations for non-English speakers. These updates improved the accessibility and effectiveness of the repairs service, especially for younger and vulnerable residents.

Case study: [Ashton Pioneer Homes](#)
Ashton Pioneer Homes (APH) enhanced resident engagement to improve their repairs and maintenance services, particularly around building safety. APH created a resident engagement team and introduced the 'Every Connection Counts' initiative, where staff and contractors actively reported repairs during visits. This proactive approach helped address issues quickly, particularly for vulnerable residents in high-rise buildings. By employing face-to-face engagement through their APH Census and partnering with local agencies, APH improved communication and safety, resulting in more responsive repairs and better resident satisfaction.

2. Sector preparation for Awaab's Law

Awaab's Law, introduced following the tragic death of Awaab Ishak, places new statutory requirements on social landlords to address health hazards such as damp and mould in a timely manner. This legislation introduces strict repair timelines and record-keeping obligations that have prompted significant changes in how housing providers manage their repair services.

Key challenges

The sector has been actively preparing for these new obligations, with many landlords investing in updated IT systems, staff training, and improved communication channels to ensure compliance with the law. Furthermore, the sector is awaiting clarity on the final version of the law once the consultation phase is completed.

[Feedback from CIH members](#) and partners reveals that while landlords are committed to meeting Awaab's Law requirements, they face resource allocation and skills shortages. Many landlords have had to rethink their repairs processes to ensure they can meet the proposed statutory deadlines without compromising on quality. Landlords face significant challenges in upgrading systems and training staff. In particular, smaller housing providers may struggle with the financial and resource implications of implementing the new processes required to comply with Awaab's Law.

Good practice from our research and engagement

- **Improved systems and processes:** In response to Awaab's Law, many housing providers have invested in upgrading systems and processes to better track and prioritise repairs, particularly those related to health hazards like damp and mould. These upgrades ensure that providers can meet statutory repair timelines, reduce delays, and maintain accurate records, which are essential for compliance.
- **Training and empowering operatives:** Effective training is crucial to equipping operatives with the skills to identify and resolve health risks during repairs. By empowering staff to take action during their visits, housing providers can address damp and mould more efficiently and ensure that repairs are completed to a high standard within the required timeframe. This also includes training operatives to identify potential resident vulnerabilities, to be compliant with Awaab's Law and ensure cases are prioritised appropriately by resident risk.
- **Resident-centred approaches:** Engaging residents in the repair process is vital for improving outcomes and compliance with Awaab's Law. By actively involving residents in shaping repairs services and listening to their concerns, housing providers can ensure that health-related repairs are prioritised, leading to greater resident satisfaction and trust.

- **Flexibility through insourcing:** Some providers have opted to bring repairs services in-house to gain greater control and flexibility in meeting Awaab's Law requirements. This approach allows providers to better manage repair timelines, respond quickly to urgent health repairs, and improve communication with residents.
- **Holistic and integrated working:** Addressing complex repair needs, such as those involving damp and mould, requires a collaborative approach across teams, including housing management and repairs. By integrating these functions, providers can better understand and tackle long-standing issues in properties, particularly those affecting vulnerable residents.
- **Clear communication and transparency:** Open, ongoing communication with residents is essential for managing expectations and ensuring transparency in the repairs process. Providers can reduce complaints, improve satisfaction, and ensure compliance with legal obligations by keeping residents informed of repair progress and timelines.

Lessons learned

Case study: [Midland Heart](#)
Midland Heart improved its response to damp and mould by actively engaging with residents and gathering feedback on the impact of these issues. Using surveys and focus groups, the organisation identified key problem areas and redesigned its repair processes to address the root causes of dampness, particularly in properties housing vulnerable residents. The results included faster response times and increased resident satisfaction.

Case study: [South Liverpool Homes](#)
South Liverpool Homes actively engaged with residents to improve their repair services, particularly addressing gaps for vulnerable residents. Through resident feedback and resident insight initiatives, the organisation identified key areas where repairs were delayed or inadequately addressed. By incorporating this feedback into their repairs processes, South Liverpool Homes improved communication, prioritised health-related repairs like damp and mould, and reduced the time taken to respond to residents' concerns. This proactive engagement led to quicker repair times and increased resident satisfaction, especially for those in vulnerable groups.

Case study: [Sutton Housing Partnership](#)
Sutton Housing Partnership (SHP) insourced its entire repairs service to improve control and responsiveness across all types of repairs. This approach allowed SHP to directly manage repair timelines and ensure operatives had the necessary resources to address complex problems, such as hoarding or other challenging circumstances. SHP's integrated working with housing management enabled a more holistic approach to both property and tenancy issues. By involving residents closely through its Repairs Focus

Group, SHP ensured that resident feedback played a key role in shaping improvements. This proactive model helped SHP reduce delays for urgent health repairs, such as those required under Awaab's Law and enhanced overall resident satisfaction.

In summary, this evidence demonstrates how the sector is adapting to meet the statutory repair timelines and record-keeping obligations under Awaab's Law, addressing issues related to health hazards such as damp and mould. By focusing on timely communication, system improvements, and resident engagement, landlords can comply with new legal requirements and improve resident safety, thus building trust in their repairs processes.

3. Operational improvements

One key finding from the Rethinking Repairs and Maintenance (RERAM) project is the need for operational improvements that empower operatives to resolve issues in real time and improve the overall efficiency of repairs services. Operational barriers such as poor communication, disjointed processes, and a lack of decision-making authority for operatives often result in delayed repairs and increased resident dissatisfaction.

Key challenges

The RERAM project and BSHR found two critical challenges that relate to operational improvements:

- **Coordination and communication**: Many operatives struggle with incomplete information and inadequate coordination between teams, leading to inefficiencies in the repairs process.

- **Decision-making authority**: Operatives often lack the authority to resolve issues on-site, leading to delays as problems are escalated through multiple layers of management.

Good practice from our research and engagement

- **Real-time decision-making:** Empowering operatives to make decisions on-site with the necessary tools, technology and information leads to faster, more efficient repairs and increases 'first time fix' rates. This approach improves overall service quality and ensures repairs are completed promptly.
- **Improved communication:** Clear and consistent communication between operatives, residents, and management is critical to ensuring repairs are carried out effectively. Effective communication systems help manage resident expectations, reduce delays, and provide greater transparency throughout the repair process.
- **Performance monitoring:** Regular measurement and monitoring of repair, and external contractor performance enables housing providers to respond quickly to inefficiencies and ensure a responsive and efficient service. Performance data and resident feedback are essential to identifying service gaps and making improvements.
- **Collaboration and coordination:** Close collaboration between housing providers, operatives, and contractors ensures a more seamless service delivery. Integrated systems and aligned processes enhance coordination and create a more resident-focused repair approach.

- **Resident feedback integration:** Actively seeking and incorporating resident feedback helps housing providers understand service gaps and improve repairs delivery. By acting on feedback, organisations can reduce complaints, enhance resident satisfaction, and ensure a more efficient, resident-centred service.

Lessons learned

Case study: St Leger Homes
St. Leger Homes implemented a text messaging system to improve communication between operatives and residents. This system allows operatives to provide real-time updates on their repair requests, improving transparency and reducing the likelihood of missed appointments. The initiative has not only improved resident satisfaction but also enhanced the efficiency of the repairs process by ensuring that operatives and residents are better coordinated.

Case study: London Borough of Havering
The London Borough of Havering partnered with Mears Group in 2022 to deliver a more efficient and resident-focused repairs service. By integrating Mears' IT system with the council's housing management platform, Havering improved coordination and communication with residents, ensuring that repairs were managed effectively from start to finish. In May 2023, the council transferred its repair call centre to Mears, reducing call waiting times and improving the accuracy of repair requests. This change significantly boosted customer satisfaction, with 97 per cent of calls answered within 30 seconds. The partnership has enhanced service delivery and resident satisfaction through improved collaboration between operatives and the housing team.

Case study: L&Q
L&Q utilised multiple feedback channels, including SMS, email, and telephone surveys, to capture resident satisfaction immediately after repairs and weeks later. This allowed L&Q to identify recurring issues, such as incomplete repairs, poor communication, and low-quality service provision. In response, they improved upfront diagnosis, ensured operatives had the right tools and parts, and enhanced communication with residents throughout the repair process. These adjustments, aligned with real-time decision-making and performance monitoring principles, led to improved outcomes, reduced follow-up repairs, and improved resident satisfaction.

In summary, this evidence highlights the importance of operational improvements in achieving efficient and resident-centred repairs services. Empowering operatives with real-time decision-making capabilities, improving communication systems, and closely monitoring performance are key to reducing delays and enhancing resident satisfaction. Integrating resident feedback into the decision-making process and fostering collaboration between operatives and housing teams can help services to be more

aligned with resident needs, further strengthening the sector's ability to meet its commitments.

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