

Responding to the Better Social Housing Review

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# WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP TO IMPROVE REPAIRS AND MAINTENANCE SERVICES:

## How to respond to recommendation three of the Better Social Housing Review

May 2024

# Acknowledgements

The Rethinking Repairs and Maintenance project was established by the Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH) and National Housing Federation (NHF) to support the social housing sector to improve its repairs and maintenance practices.

To do this, CIH established a best practice group formed of representatives from registered social landlords, tenant representation bodies, equality and diversity bodies, and procurement and contracting experts.

Members of the working group are listed below, and we extend our thanks to them for their contributions to this work.

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# Introduction

The Better Social Housing Review (BSHR) was commissioned by the Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH) and the National Housing Federation (NHF) in 2022 to examine issues relating to the quality of social housing.

Following six months of work by an independent panel, the BSHR set out its findings in December 2022. It found many positive examples of good practice in the sector but also significant and embedded issues that were detrimentally affecting residents, especially from black and minority ethnic (BME) backgrounds. It subsequently set out seven recommendations to the sector to improve the quality and decency of homes, and the culture and responsiveness of social landlords.

Recommendation three focused on repairs and maintenance, stating that:

*“Housing associations should partner with residents, contractors and frontline staff to develop and apply new standards defining what an excellent maintenance and repairs process looks like.”*

To support the sector to respond effectively to this recommendation, CIH established the Rethinking Repairs and Maintenance project in July 2023. One of the main aims of the project has been to define the guiding principles that social landlords should use to involve residents, staff, and contractors in the review and (re)design of their repairs and maintenance services, and to share examples and case studies of how landlords can consult with their residents, staff, and contractors to do so.

## The Regulator of Social Housing’s consumer standards

As the project developed, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) and the Regulator of Social Housing (RSH) took steps to improve regulation and practice in the sector. In April 2024, the RSH introduced its consumer standards, which included items on repairs and maintenance. These are:

### The Regulator of Social Housing’s consumer standards - repairs, maintenance, and planned improvements:

- Registered providers must enable repairs and maintenance issues to be reported easily.
- Registered providers must set timescales for the completion of repairs, maintenance and planned improvements, clearly communicate them to tenants and take appropriate steps to deliver to them.
- Registered providers must keep tenants informed about repairs, maintenance and planned improvements to their homes with clear and timely communication.
- Registered providers must understand and fulfil their maintenance responsibilities in respect of communal areas.
- Registered providers must ensure that the delivery of repairs, maintenance and planned improvements to homes and communal areas is informed by the needs of tenants and provides value for money.

The consumer standards also state that registered providers must take the views of residents into account in their decision-making about how their services are delivered, and that they must take action to deliver fair access to, and equitable outcomes of, their services for all residents. They must also take steps to ensure residents have the information they need to scrutinise and hold their provider to account. Simultaneously, the forthcoming introduction of Awaab’s Law will place minimum requirements and timescales on providers for investigating and responding to health hazards inside their homes, and the new Competence and Conduct Standard will include an outcomes-focused standard which will apply to all staff involved in the provision of housing management services.



## How to use this guidance

This guide sets out twelve guiding principles for how social landlords should work with their residents and colleagues to improve their repairs and maintenance services. These are grouped into six themes, covering:

- Improving cultures and behaviours
- Inclusivity and tackling discrimination
- Structuring your engagement
- Involving colleagues
- Understanding your performance
- Closing the loop.

Although you can look at each of these themes individually, they are intended to be approached in order, starting with a re-examination of your culture and how inclusive your engagement and resident scrutiny processes are, and then passing consecutively through each theme. Alongside these principles, we have also published recommendations for working in partnership with contractors and service providers, which are included at the end of this report.

We recognise that housing providers are unique. Each provider works within different geographical contexts, serves different communities, and faces different challenges in delivering repairs and maintenance services. Smaller housing providers, specialist providers, and providers with a proportionally large number of older people's and/or supported accommodation, all need to approach the delivery of repairs and maintenance services differently.

Consequently, we have tried to strike a balance between articulating principles that we feel all providers can follow, and defining those principles in such a way that they can be easily folded into the structures, practices, and priorities of different providers. Throughout the guide, we have included examples of best practice and other practical suggestions that you can adopt in your own work.

Ultimately, we want this guide to help you work with your residents and colleagues to review and improve your repairs and maintenance services. This is not something that will necessarily be quick or easy, especially given the wider financial challenges facing the sector. But by embedding these principles in how you approach reviewing your services, you can deliver on the ambition of the BSHR, for your residents and your colleagues alike.





# Improving cultures and behaviours

If there is one thread running through the entire BSHR, it is the need to improve cultures and behaviours across the whole social housing sector.

The BSHR concluded that the imbalance between residents and landlords continues to be one of the largest problems facing the sector, and that this imbalance – underpinned by unfounded assumptions, ignorance, and defensiveness – perpetuates rather than dismantles the stigma and discrimination faced by people living in social housing.

The necessary starting point for improving repairs and maintenance services is recognising – and tackling – this imbalance. To do this, social landlords need to tackle stigma and insist upon empathy, understanding, and professionalism in every interaction you and your operatives have with residents.

We also need to work towards a model of engagement that does not sit in a silo waiting for residents to ask for help. A more proactive form of engagement, one built on the principle of making every contact count, can ensure that every opportunity is taken to improve the delivery of repairs and maintenance services to residents.

## **Guiding principle one: Tackle stigma and insist upon empathy, understanding, and professionalism in every interaction you and your operatives have with residents**

While the need to improve cultures and behaviours is a thread running through the whole of the BSHR, it was noted especially strongly in the findings on repairs and maintenance. The BSHR found that the process of managing repairs and maintenance services can be significantly exacerbated by the inadequate handling of complaints and what was termed the ‘defensive culture’ of too many social landlords. It noted that colleagues in contact centre roles can sometimes push back on what residents are telling them, rather than accepting and acting on their information. It also found that some social landlords were too quick to see complaints as criticism that necessitated a defensive response, rather than an opportunity to make amends and learn lessons.

At the heart of these issues is stigma. Previous research by CIH identified several issues that residents commonly experienced with landlords and their staff. These included making negative assumptions about the lifestyles of residents; contemptuous and discriminatory treatment; actively ignoring their residents; and prioritising business and development over community. For those already more likely to experience societal discrimination, such as residents with long-term illnesses or disabilities and BME residents, these issues were all too often inflected with strands of ableism and racism. Residents told us that language use is key to tackling this appropriately, and actively taking the time to listen to concerns raised by residents and groups of residents that tend to experience poorer service outcomes.

If these issues are not identified and addressed, the engagement you have with residents about your repairs and maintenance services are unlikely to be meaningful, and residents are less likely to trust that any changes will take place afterwards. When stigma pervades the atmosphere of landlord-resident relationships, resident engagement is more likely to be viewed as tokenistic; a tick-box exercise rather than a drive to genuinely learn and improve. Tackling stigma and building a positive, empathetic culture across your whole organisation (and any service providers) is a vital pre-requisite to improving your repairs and maintenance service. Without it, the issues identified in the BSHR will only continue to occur.

## **Guiding principle two: Make every contact count**

Making every contact count is a principle that originated in health and social care. According to the definition used by the NHS, it is an approach to behaviour change that uses the millions of everyday interactions that we have with individuals to support them to make positive changes to their physical and mental health and wellbeing. It is based on the idea that every interaction we have with someone is an opportunity to help them – to understand their needs and what we can do to better meet those needs. It is opportunistic and strategic at the same time.

In the context of repairs and maintenance, the meaning is slightly different, although the underlying principle remains the same. Social landlords have multiple contact points with their residents through a variety of different activities. Community events, responding to anti-social behaviour reports, and mending a broken tap are all examples of situations where a representative of a landlord will encounter, and have a conversation with, a resident. Residents told us that moving into a new home is also an important contact point that sets the tone for the relationship between the landlord and the occupant. In these scenarios, making every contact count means using these encounters to understand if the diverse needs of residents are being met; if repairs are outstanding or need to be reported; and more widely if residents are happy with the state of repair of their home.

Building on the original NHS definition, the NICE NG6 guidance on the health risks associated with cold homes provide useful guidance that could be adopted by social landlords for this purpose, including recommendations six and ten:

**Recommendation six: Non-health and social care workers who visit people at home should assess their heating needs.**

**Recommendation ten: Train heating engineers, meter installers and those providing building insulation to help vulnerable people at home.**

Building on NICE NG6 recommendation six, you should try to ensure that all colleagues who visit people at home are trained to recognise, and have appropriate conversations with residents about, potential repairs issues. Your colleagues should also be empowered to have conversations with residents about how generally happy they are with their home and whether it meets their needs. Beyond this, there are other measures that some landlords are beginning to pioneer, such as equipping their colleagues with a mobile phone app that can be used to photograph potential repair issues and have an initial diagnosis made via artificial intelligence. Equipping frontline colleagues with the training, confidence, and reporting processes that they need to do this can uncover repairs issues that might otherwise go unnoticed, especially if – as the BSHR found – some residents may be less likely to report a problem for fear of discrimination. Residents also told us that the traditional Housing Officer role is a vital yet underappreciated community contact point. They can play an important role in supporting residents when

repairs are reported and when they go wrong, but only if they are given the time and space to establish positive, personalised relationships with different communities.

Building on NICE NG6 recommendation ten, you should also enable your repairs operatives – heating engineers, responsive repair teams, and everyone else – to make the contacts they have with your residents count in the same way. Key to this is working in partnership with your contractors, service providers, and/or in-house repairs and maintenance teams to cultivate a culture of awareness and understanding, and helping them to put this into practice inside people's homes. While fixing the repair at hand is typically the priority, taking a little bit of extra time to scan the walls for other issues and talk to the resident about their needs can pay dividends in identifying and addressing any other issues that may be present. If there are other issues present that the operative can repair there and then, they should be empowered to do so rather than raising an entirely new works request, which can be frustrating for the resident.





# Inclusivity and tackling discrimination

Another central theme running through the BSHR was unequal service outcomes. As we have seen, racism, as well as other forms of discrimination and injustice, is a problem that is structurally embedded within the delivery of repairs and maintenance services. The BSHR also uncovered how poorer repairs and maintenance outcomes were experienced by residents with long-term illnesses and disabilities, and on lower household incomes.

Putting this right requires a recognition of past failings and mistakes, but also a renewed commitment to placing the voices of residents more likely to experience poorer service outcomes at the centre of engagement processes. The sector must be better at actively seeking out, and then listening carefully to, the voices of residents who can all too often fall through gaps of a poorly designed, exclusionary repairs and maintenance service. The two key steps we must collectively take are to use a range of information to know our silences and inequities, and then include by design to ensure that we are basing the way we redesign and review our services on the views and experiences of those who we haven't listened well to in the past.

Doing this doesn't just improve outcomes for a few groups of residents; rather, actively knowing our silence and practicing inclusion by design results in better service delivery for everyone.

## Guiding principle three: Use of range of information to know your silences and inequities

Social landlords collect and hold a large amount of information about their homes, and increasingly about their residents. Using this data smartly and efficiently, and triangulating different data sources with each other, is the best way of obtaining an understanding of your silences and inequities. It can show you who is more likely to be detrimentally affected by poor service

provision, and whose voices you are not hearing from in your resident engagement activities.

The sources you can use fall into three groups: qualitative knowledge; internal data collection; and public research and data.

### Qualitative knowledge

Qualitative knowledge is the insight and information you receive from the most important people working in your communities: your housing officers, resident liaison officers, and community teams. The BSHR emphasised the need for social landlords to work more closely with their staff and colleagues to improve repairs and maintenance services, and the knowledge and experience of your frontline teams is central to doing this.

Following the principles of incorporating the views of colleagues, set out below, you can obtain significant insights into the residents and communities who feel that they are not being listened to, or who are experiencing issues with how repairs and maintenance services are being delivered to their homes.

### Internal data collection

Internal data collection is the range of data that you collect on the performance of your repairs and maintenance services, the quality of your homes, and your residents. This includes, but is by no means limited to, asset management data and property information, insights you get from any sensor equipment installed in the homes of your residents, and data from any satisfaction surveys or feedback mechanisms you have in place.

Critically, it also includes information you might hold about your residents, such as their ethnicity, age, support needs, or any language barriers they face. Looking at all this data together, and assessing how it corresponds to the qualitative knowledge you are receiving from your community teams, can help you to see who you need to listen more to.

Improving internal data collection processes is the key aim of the Knowing Our Homes project, established by the NHF to respond to recommendation two of the BSHR. Engaging with this work is the best way of improving how you can know your silences and inequities.

### Public research and data

Finally, public research and data is useful for triangulating your conclusions from the two other sources within a national context. For example, we know from the BSHR, the English Housing Survey, the Regulator of Social Housing, and other research that repairs and maintenance service outcomes vary regionally, across different demographic groups, and across different housing types.

At a national level, this data shows that residents with long-term illnesses and disabilities and black and minority ethnic residents consistently experience poorer service outcomes from repairs and maintenance services. If your own internal data and qualitative knowledge says different, it is worth pausing and questioning whether this is accurate, or whether you need to do more work to understand your homes and your residents.

Other data can help too, especially in doublechecking that you are adequately hearing the voices of residents from different communities who may have specific perspectives you need to incorporate. In areas where you have many homes, the Indices of Multiple Deprivation can help you to understand whether you need to engage more with specific places.

For example, you might find you are having lots of responsive repair requests from places that score highly on crime deprivation. If a significant proportion of these requests relate to windows, doors, gates, or fences, it could indicate that residents are worried about the safety and security of their homes, and that you need to do more work to discern if this is the case.

Keeping a watching brief on public research and data, and repeatedly juxtaposing it with your internal data trends and qualitative knowledge, can help you to spot areas that should be more centrally involved in reviewing how your approach repairs and maintenance.

Taken together, using a range of information sources, and practising triangulation will help you to understand how representative your current engagement and scrutiny processes are of your residents, and if you need to improve that representation. How you can do this is through inclusion by design.





### Guiding principle four: Include by design

Understanding your silences and inequities should directly inform how you design your engagement strategy with residents. You can do this by following best practice in inclusion by design.

In this context, inclusion by design means designing out barriers to resident engagement, and making sure that your methods of resident engagement are inclusive of the needs and requirements of different groups. It is a way of actively engaging with residents who experience consistently poorer outcomes from repairs and maintenance services, and/or who are unable to engage through some of the methods that you might have been using in the past. It is a commitment to working with these residents to understand their experiences and give them a central voice in your decision-making processes. Put differently, practising inclusion by design is an essential prerequisite to designing and delivering repairs and maintenance services that are free of discrimination, racism, and unequal outcomes.

There are at least two ways you can do this. The first is reviewing the composition of any pre-existing groups, scrutiny panels, or forums that inform the design and review of your repairs and maintenance services to understand how representative they are of your residents. Do they adequately include residents more likely to experience poor service outcomes, especially black and minority ethnic residents? Are residents caught up in repairs backlogs sufficiently represented? If you have, for example, a large proportion of your homes in areas of high multiple deprivation, are you ensuring they have a voice? And what about older people, residents in supported accommodation, and leaseholders? Of course, these are questions you should be continually asking of all your resident engagement activities, but they are especially important for reviewing your repairs and maintenance services.

The second step you can take is moving from inclusion by design, to designing to include. More usual forms of engagement and scrutiny, such as residents' panels, may unwittingly exclude people from participating. Designing to include means delivering bespoke engagement activities that are tailored to the needs and requirements of different groups of residents. Some of the examples of good practice we have heard about in this research are:

- Drawing on community networks and partners to deliver bespoke engagement and outreach sessions, such as through local voluntary sector partnerships. For example, this could entail working with community coffee mornings for older people or local faith groups to gather feedback from residents in safe, supportive environments.
- Undertaking equality impact assessments on resident engagement frameworks to ensure they are inclusive.
- Using British Sign Language interpreters to gather feedback from residents with hearing impairments.
- Holding monthly meetings in-situ in retirement living and supported living services to capture feedback on repairs and maintenance concerns, or appointing a dedicated operative for repairs and maintenance in assisted living schemes, who can act as a single point of contact for residents or their carers.

Distributing surveys and questionnaires on repairs and maintenance services in multiple formats. This can include printing paper copies so a carer can work through the questions with a resident; ensuring that surveys are offered in plain text format for screen readers; or offering an option to complete over the phone through a translator, in cases where English is not a resident's first language.

Building accessibility tools into your website and any other digital communications you send to residents. Residents told us that many social landlords are starting to do this, using tools like Recite Me to make their websites accessible and inclusive for people with different communication requirements. This needs to also include the automatic translation of any downloadable documents (e.g. PDFs) that residents need to access.

Trialling shorter, snappier forms of engagement, such as drop-in centres or arranging short 5 minutes telephone calls with residents to ask focused questions about their experiences. Residents told us this might be an effective way of engaging with people who lead busy work and family lives, and don't have the time to commit to a scrutiny panel or other more intensive forms of engagement.

While many of these examples of good practices can be used by different social landlords, designing how you engage with residents should be driven by your assessment of your own silences and inequities. These will inevitably be slightly different depending on who you are, the communities you serve, and how you operate.







# Structuring your engagement

Social landlords are experienced at delivering resident engagement and tenant voice activities. The sector deploys a swathe of effective methods, from tenant and resident associations and resident groups to doorstep conversations and mystery shopping. The sector is also increasingly using technology and innovation to gather real time feedback from residents on a range of different issues, including methods such as automated text emails sent just after a responsive repair.

Structuring your engagement with residents about repairs and maintenance services should follow the Together with Tenants charter, but there are two specific things that landlords should also commit to when focusing on this theme. These are giving your residents the freedom to scrutinise different parts of your repairs and maintenance service, and supporting them to do so, and committing to engaging throughout the whole repairs and maintenance cycle, especially at procurement and key milestones in service design.

## **Guiding principle five: Give your residents the freedom to scrutinise different parts of your repairs and maintenance service, and support them to do so**

The successful design and delivery of repairs and maintenance services is complex, and dependent upon multiple factors - only some of which are within the control of social landlords. Skills shortages, market volatility, unpredictable inflation, and broader financial pressures on the sector mean that the delivery of an excellent repairs and maintenance service - however that is defined - is extremely challenging. We have encountered examples of social landlords worried that they might not be able to meet standards of excellence desired by residents, at least not in the short term, because of financial pressures or other organisational challenges.

In this context, it can feel challenging to give residents the keys to the service and allow them to examine everything they want to. However, our work with residents has shown that giving residents the freedom to scrutinise different parts of repairs and maintenance

services is an essential prerequisite to meaningful engagement and participation. Good practice in this area therefore looks like allowing your resident groups the freedom to decide the scope of their review of your services, and then providing them with the tools, data, and resources they need to do so.

The role of the landlord in this partnership then becomes about fulfilling requests for KPIs, working with residents' groups to gather information from different directorates and departments, and arranging for them to speak to the directors, operatives, residents, and staff members they want to consult with. In other words, it is facilitatory, helping your residents' groups to undertake the activities they need to in order to meet the scope of their review. This doesn't mean that any broader context or challenges can't be included in their work, and we have heard many examples of landlords working in partnership with residents to sketch out the wider financial circumstances facing the sector, and of residents taking this into account in their scrutiny activities and reports.

Just as importantly, residents have told us that attempting to direct a review towards one aspect or another of a repairs and maintenance service can arouse suspicion. It can give residents reason to pause and ask themselves: why are we being asked to look over here, not over there? This means that if there are certain parts of your repairs and maintenance service you would like residents to examine, you need to make it clear that you are not doing so to try and limit their scope, but because you would like their views on how those specific parts of your service can be improved.

Ultimately, if you do not give your residents the freedom to set the scope of their own reviews, it can breed mistrust, and may cause your residents to become alienated from your scrutiny panel.

## Guiding principle six: Commit to engaging throughout the whole repairs and maintenance cycle

Working with your residents to improve your repairs and maintenance service should be seen as processual and cyclical, not something that is undertaken once or twice throughout a contract period. You should commit to engaging with residents on service design and delivery throughout the whole repairs and maintenance cycle, paying particular attention to procurement periods and key milestones.

A critical time to engage is when you are reprocuring a repairs and maintenance contract, whether that is a central external contract for delivering most of your services, building up your internal capacity, or bringing a specialist contractor on board to deal with specific issues (e.g. damp and mould, pest infestations). Residents told us this should also include other services that undertake maintenance and upkeep works, such as grounds maintenance. Residents should be involved right at the start of this journey, and the most effective part of the process that residents can influence is the specification of the service and how different elements of tender responses should be prioritised and scored. Critically, residents will also require training to understand what procurement is and how they can be involved.

There are different approaches to doing this, which will vary across different social landlords. Some landlords we have engaged with have involved residents in setting the specification and scoring criteria, but then found their residents did not feel the need to be involved in the actual interview and scoring process itself.

Others have invited groups of residents to attend pre-specification market engagement workshops, so prospective bidders can understand their views and how they should aim to meet them when they respond to a later tender. Others have involved residents in contract negotiation meetings, noting that this gives them a clear understanding of whether the vision and values of the contractor aligns with the needs of their residents.

However you do this, establishing a process for involving your residents in the procurement and appointment of contractors is critical, and this is also true if you are redesigning your in-house repairs and maintenance services.





Residents also told us that a golden thread of engagement needs to run throughout the whole repairs and maintenance process, going through different departments so everyone knows which residents are involved and how. Residents told us that sometimes, detailed engagement and scrutiny can take place during procurement, but then cease when a contract becomes live and is passed to a different department. Residents perceived this can be because of a lack of communication between departments, which results in contract managers not knowing they have been involved in scrutinising the procurement.

Residents told us that the best way to address this is the creation of a 'golden thread', a set of information that specifies which residents are involved, what has been agreed with regards to their involvement at different stages, and who is 'sponsoring' their involvement: usually a senior director of repairs and maintenance or asset management. This information should then be provided to procurement and contract management teams, so everyone is aware that residents will be scrutinising the procurement process and delivery of the contract. Having this arrangement in place will remove the possibility that as repairs and maintenance services move from procurement to delivery, pre-agreed scrutiny activities fall through the cracks.

After a contract is in place, you should as a minimum commit to engaging with your residents at key milestones in service delivery – milestones that you can look to agree with your resident groups. This should include pivotal moments of internal service review, such as before relevant board meetings, and the drawing up of any key changes you might want to make to the service to improve its efficiency or accessibility, such as when you make updates to online repair reporting portals or change how you are prioritising different types of repairs. It should also include moments of wider structural organisational change, such as mergers/takeovers and internal departmental restructuring.

For individual residents, the most important milestone is when they have had a repair or planned maintenance carried out in their home. Residents told us that the repairs journey should be split into two parts: 1) from a repair being reported to an operative being dispatched, and 2) from when the operative is sent out to final completion of the works. Resident satisfaction with a responsive repair they have had carried out is a central part of the Tenant Satisfaction Measures. But there are other ways you can gather resident feedback on an ongoing basis.

For example, you could create 'Estate Service Champions' in different communities to act as a conduit for collecting feedback on an ongoing basis, or spend some time arranging to visit residents who have recently had works done to understand how they have found it. You can also give your residents a way of providing feedback on individual operatives who have carried out work inside their home. Residents have also emphasised to us that, when repairs are carried out in blocks of flats, there is a communal impact, and that there should therefore be a process at the end of each repair to enable the whole block to provide feedback.

Residents also told us that moving into a new home is a crucial opportunity for providing information and engagement about repairs and maintenance processes. Good practice relayed to us by residents included welcome folders, such as the kind often found in hotels, which should be made available in different formats and languages. Residents also told us that moving into a new home should be the moment where repairs and maintenance processes (along with wider services) are explained, and that the new resident should be given the opportunity to ask any initial questions.

Ultimately, how you engage throughout the cycle will be unique to you. But ensuring you involve residents from the very beginning and then at key milestones along the way will enable you to understand if you are delivering a better service, and what you can do to improve. The final step to this process is ensuring that you provide timely feedback to residents involved in scrutiny processes to inform them how things are changing as a result of their input. Residents told us that in some cases, scrutiny panels are engaged with only sporadically, and that no meaningful feedback is given on how their input is improving service design. Inevitably, this can lead to people leaving the scrutiny group and becoming disaffected with their landlord. Employing rapid feedback mechanisms such as 'you said we did' keeps scrutiny panels engaged, and helps residents to have visibility on the changes you are making as a result of their work.







# Involving colleagues

The BSHR highlighted that as well as residents, social landlords should work with their staff to improve their repairs and maintenance services. Colleagues have a unique perspective on repairs and maintenance, and providing them with meaningful, structured opportunities to feed in their views can help reveal deficiencies in the service or ways that it could work better.

However, some of the research we have done suggests that colleagues are sometimes not given the opportunity to do this. Social landlords should include colleagues from all areas of the organisation in service review to understand their views, and reflect their contributions in workload models and professional development frameworks.

## Guiding principle seven: Include colleagues from all areas of the organisation

The end-to-end repairs and maintenance process involves colleagues from multiple areas of a social landlord's operations. This is not just those working in repairs and maintenance teams, but includes frontline housing officers, contact centre operatives, works planners, complaints handling officers, tenant liaison officers, as well as colleagues in finance and procurement departments. It also necessarily involves colleagues at different levels of seniority.

All colleagues who encounter the repairs and maintenance process have a unique viewpoint. They see and become experts in a small part of the overall system, and will instinctively understand the ways that it works well or could be improved. Through their interactions with other colleagues, they also have an important perspective on communication processes and how different parts of the overall system relate to each other. Residents have told us that they see this too: that Housing Officers or repairs operatives will sometimes have good ideas about how to deal with certain issues, but that they sometimes aren't taken into account by those managing the service.

Beyond this, other colleagues not obviously involved in the process will also have an important perspective. For example, colleagues with remits spanning domestic abuse, anti-social behaviour, or safeguarding can help you understand if your service is taking advantage of opportunities to identify residents who are vulnerable and in need of additional support.

Social landlords looking to bring their staff members into the design and review of repairs and maintenance processes should recognise this variegated expertise and seek to include as many relevant colleagues from across the business as possible.

A first step in doing this is to conduct a mapping exercise to understand who from across your organisation should be invited to contribute to reviewing your repairs and maintenance service. You should try to take account of colleagues who are directly involved in the repairs and maintenance process, however tangentially, and colleagues who can bring alternative perspectives or challenge your thinking.

Once you have undergone this process, there are several ways you can begin to gather feedback. Some of the examples we have learned about in the research are:

- Including a wide range of colleagues within procurement and contract negotiation processes.
- Utilising colleague engagement forums to discuss your repairs and maintenance service.
- Where applicable, using 'staff who are customers' groups to gather insights from colleagues who are also residents.
- Undertaking thematic focus groups with different teams to understand their viewpoints, e.g. with property leadership teams, operations teams, or contact centre teams.
- Setting up bespoke working groups, including as a minimum colleagues who are most acutely involved in the repairs and maintenance process or who might be particularly affected by proposed service redesign.

- 'Ask me anything' sessions with senior leadership teams and asset managers, allowing colleagues to ask questions and feed in perspectives anonymously.
- Establishing roles such as 'Employee Engagement Champions' in repairs and maintenance services.

Importantly, these engagement activities need to be designed in a way that enables colleagues to give their honest, untarnished view of your repairs and maintenance services. Residents have told us that while all colleagues should be involved in reviewing repairs and maintenance services, they'd be worried that they are afraid to say what they really think. Ensuring that you create a safe, open space for colleagues to openly feed in their views is therefore vital, as without it you might not get the feedback that could really make a difference in improving your processes.

### Guiding principle eight: Reflect their contributions in workload models and professional development frameworks

The BSHR emphasised that employees of social landlords, especially frontline housing staff working directly with residents, are experiencing enormous pressures and demands on their time. It also noted that challenging workloads are contributing to high rates of staff turnover and making it more difficult for residents to communicate with their landlord.

In this context, asking colleagues from across the organisation to feed into the design and review of repairs and maintenance processes could be experienced as burdensome, or as one more task that colleagues need to add to an already overwhelming list. There is a risk that this might lead to alienation, or a perception that the views of colleagues are being invited but not adequately appreciated. It is therefore critical that colleague contributions are sufficiently accounted for in workload models, and that colleagues are supported to incorporate their engagement into continuing professional development (CPD) frameworks.

There is no single approach to doing this, as it will be dependent on the internal organisation of your teams, your HR processes, and the methods of engagement you are looking to use. It will also depend on current and predicted future demands on your colleagues' time. In all cases, working closely with service managers to understand their teams' current capacity to engage and ensuring that you are not requesting feedback at particularly pressured times is important.

Adequately incorporating your colleagues' contributions into their workload is important across the board, but is especially vital if you are asking colleagues to be involved in lengthy or time-consuming forms of engagement. For example, if you are asking colleagues to sit on a working group that will examine different aspects of your repairs and maintenance service, time for this will need to be properly carved out from their current workloads.

Lastly, ensuring that your colleagues have visibility over any improvements you make is critical. Try to avoid engagement that might be perceived as extractive, whereby you gather feedback from your colleagues without making visible how that feedback has led to change. Ensuring that colleagues feel meaningfully involved in reviewing your repairs and maintenance process will help to secure their buy-in, and ultimately help to build more consistent feedback loops that can be utilised across the lifespan of your repairs and maintenance contracts.





# Understanding your performance

In social housing, there is an adage of ‘what gets measured gets done.’ Measuring and monitoring performance using Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and other forms of metrics is as old as social housing itself. KPIs provide a vehicle for operational and continuous improvement, and if the same KPI is used consistently across multiple organisations, they can be used as a form of benchmarking, or understanding performance relative to others trying to achieve the same, or similar, objectives.

But at the same time, focusing on KPIs can sometimes obscure wider issues with a repairs and maintenance service. In the late 2000s and 2010s, the Tenant Management Organisation (TMO) responsible for repairs and maintenance in Grenfell Tower maintained a 95 per cent satisfaction record for repairs. This was despite widespread issues, such as lengthy delays to responsive repairs, the frequent stigmatisation of residents when repair requests were made, and growing disrepair. Evidence gathered by the Grenfell Tower inquiry suggested that the 95 per cent figure was at least a partial result of gaming: the active use and abuse of data collection processes and statistics to portray a level of service performance that was different to the reality experienced by residents.

This cautionary tale shows the need to construct KPIs that enable the accurate measurement and monitoring of reality. In undertaking this research, we have consulted with landlords, residents, and experts on data, benchmarking, and business management to understand what good KPIs look like and how they can be used to improve repairs and maintenance services. One key finding is that the answer to this question is contextual: it depends on your organisation, your operational needs, and most importantly the priorities of your residents. Instead of publishing a list of KPIs, we have therefore settled on two guiding principles that you should try and follow when measuring and monitoring your performance. These are taking a hybrid approach to KPIs, which recognises the value of benchmarkable data as well as the creation of bespoke KPIs that measure what matters most to your residents; and working with your residents to define what else they need to scrutinise your repairs and maintenance service.

## Guiding principle nine: Take a hybrid approach to KPIs

Taking a hybrid approach to KPIs means harnessing the insight that can be generated by different KPIs and using them to drive improvements to your repairs and maintenance services. In our work, we have found that doing this requires a balance between two approaches: benchmarkable KPIs and resident-driven KPIs. There can be instances where a KPI is both benchmarkable and resident-driven, but they usually have different origins, characteristics, and uses that can offer unique insights.

### Benchmarkable KPIs

Benchmarkable KPIs are KPIs that can be compared across organisations. They allow you to compare your performance to similar organisations. They are widely used in social housing to compare repairs and maintenance performance across peer groups. Peer groups can be defined in different ways, but are commonly formed of different social landlords of the same size (i.e. number of homes), similar geography (e.g. predominantly remote, rural, or urban), similar archetype (e.g. predominantly high-rise or pre-1945 homes), or with the same repairs and maintenance delivery model (e.g. in-house teams vs. external contractor).

Throughout our work we have learned of different instances of good practice in benchmarkable KPIs. To be considered benchmarkable, these KPIs are usually independently defined and verified, with clear guidance for how data should be collected. This minimises (but does not eliminate) the possibility for variance in measurement. Overall, this process ensures that comparisons across peer groups are trustworthy and accurate, and provides confidence that we are comparing apples with apples.

Benchmarkable KPIs also offer other benefits. We have heard evidence that because they are independently defined and verified, they can be more trusted by residents because they are viewed as less susceptible to manipulation. This is one of the main benefits of Tenant Satisfaction Measures (TSMs), which have been introduced by the Regulator of Social Housing (RSH).

Benchmarking also offers opportunities for good practice sharing between individual landlords. For example, we have spoken to landlords across the North East of England of similar sizes, who regularly print off their shared KPIs and meet to discuss them. This means that when one is performing better than another on a certain KPI, they can discuss exactly why, with the result often being the adoption of better practices and processes that can drive improvement. In this way, the main value of benchmarkable KPIs is the ability to identify strengths and weaknesses in relation to peers, and to learn from those peers to improve different aspects of a repairs and maintenance service.

### Resident-driven KPIs

Resident-driven KPIs are the other side of the coin. Because benchmarkable KPIs need to be consistently collected by different social landlords in a peer group to be effective, they typically cannot be co-created with residents. This leaves a risk that KPIs might not be measuring and monitoring the issues that matter most to residents. Beyond this, resident-driven KPIs do not need to be actively co-constructed with residents. Our work has found that there are relatively few instances of the development of KPIs in this way. However, they can be created to measure and monitor how you are delivering on the priorities of residents and to give you a greater understanding of some of the issues that residents might be reporting.

Although by their nature resident-driven KPIs will be unique to each landlord, our work has found that a significant gap in current approaches is having adequate KPIs to measure and monitor cultures and

behaviours in the delivery of repairs and maintenance services. These things are more difficult to quantify but are extremely significant in shaping good services and good experiences for residents. The TSMs include four measures relating to respectful engagement and complaints handling (TP06-TP09), but there are ways that social landlords can go further to understand if positive changes to cultures and behaviours are taking place across the organisation (and, where relevant, any external repairs and maintenance contractors).

For example, one social landlord in our working group has instigated a process to measure if contractors, colleagues, and other stakeholders are acting in the way they expect and treating residents with empathy and respect. Using innovative new software, they developed a customer satisfaction process that aimed to give a greater understanding of resident satisfaction with different parts of the repairs journey, especially the process of agreeing and arranging follow-on appointments and how instances of no access were dealt with. They also disaggregated satisfaction data by individual contractors to give residents visibility over the behaviours and standards of all operatives working in and on their homes. This information was shown to residents and used internally to inform scrutiny processes and internal decision making, but not published externally.

Overall, taking a hybrid approach towards KPIs entails understanding the priorities of your residents and your organisation and developing ways to measure and monitor progress against these priorities, while simultaneously working alongside peers to share good practice and learn how to improve.





## Guiding principle 10: Work with your residents to define what else they need to scrutinise repairs

As well as metrics and KPIs, there are other forms of information that residents will want to help them scrutinise your repairs and maintenance performance. Data and statistics never tell the whole story on their own; they always need qualification, explanation, and triangulation within a wider story to make sense. Sometimes, the more metrics we have, the less insight we can extract.

Working collaboratively with residents to explore and agree on what else they need to hold your repairs and maintenance performance to account is therefore the essential companion to metrics and KPIs. Our work with residents has highlighted some of the other information and activities that they might want to scrutinise your performance:

Explanations of why metrics and KPIs have not been met

- Accurate and up-to-date stock condition information
- Feedback received from residents on social media
- Interviews with colleagues and contractors to dig deeper into specific issues
- Information about survey sample sizes, both for TSM data and any other surveys that you might undertake to understand resident views
- Listening into phone calls between contact centre operatives and residents reporting repairs
- Information about the content of and response to complaints, not just how many have been received or addressed

- 'Deep dives' into specific repairs and maintenance cases, especially those that have taken a long time to resolve or that have resulted in particularly poor experiences or outcomes for residents
- Giving residents the opportunity to go on 'away days' with contractors, such as spending a day 'in the van' with a repairs operative or visiting warehouses
- Supporting residents to design and deploy their own satisfaction surveys
- Information about the qualifications, training, and opportunities that landlords are offering to their staff
- All presented in a clear, concise, and accessible format. Residents told us that KPI dashboards including charts and simple data points is a useful way to do this.

These examples are indicative, and you should aim to work with your own residents to understand what else they might need to have an effective oversight of your repairs and maintenance service. Just as importantly, our research shows that providing residents with training opportunities to be effective participants in scrutiny processes is vital.





# Closing the loop

The steps that you take to improve your repairs and maintenance service are continuous and cyclical, and we know through the research we have undertaken for this project that social landlords are persistently looking for ways to enhance their performance.

The previous guiding principles are centred on how you can work with residents and colleagues to improve your repairs and maintenance services. A final and important step to consider is how you close the feedback loop and allow your residents visibility and transparency over how you are following the guiding principles and implementing positive changes.

Accordingly, the last two guiding principles are to make your performance and how you are improving your repairs and maintenance service transparent and visible to residents and colleagues alike, and to allow your residents and colleagues the space to challenge and scrutinise how you are delivering change.

## **Guiding principle 11: Make your performance and how you are improving your repairs and maintenance service transparent and visible**

Regardless of how you carry out your engagement and where it leads you, ensuring that your residents and colleagues can understand the progress you are making towards improving your repairs and maintenance service is vital. In one sense, this is about opening the black box of your performance and presenting what is inside to your residents, colleagues, and the wider sector in a transparent, accessible, and inclusive way. If you have a wider commitment to transparency and accountability, and have these commitments embedded in your processes, this should be automatic.

Social landlords have well-established processes on how performance data is made available to residents and colleagues. These should be harnessed to tell a story about what you are learning, and how you are using this learning to make tangible changes to your repairs and maintenance service. Residents also told us that this information needs to be provided in a timely manner, to give continuous assurance that change is being worked towards.

In addition, making sure these processes are inclusive and available to all your residents is important. Social media, regular newsletters, events in the community, and any other activities you hold are opportunities to regularly open the black box and allow your residents and colleagues to see what is inside. Special attention should be given to how you communicate any changes you make to those more likely to experience poorer service outcomes.

## **Guiding principle 12: Allow your residents and colleagues the space to challenge and scrutinise how you are delivering change**

Finally, the BSHR concluded with a call for social landlords to work with residents and colleagues to undertake an annual review of progress made against each of its six core recommendations. It highlighted that for the recommendations to drive meaningful change in social housing, landlords should enable and empower residents and colleagues to examine how well they are doing in terms of implementing them, including pinpointing how any challenges or barriers can be overcome.

This is especially important for repairs and maintenance, partly because the implementation of recommendation three is not a quick fix. Social landlords face multiple pressures on their repairs and maintenance services, from market volatility and financial pressures to the shift to complying with the Regulator of Social Housing's new regime. Tellingly, none of the social landlords we have engaged with in preparing this guide believe they have repairs and maintenance 'solved', and many openly acknowledged that they were at the beginning of a learning process that would take time to get right.

Successfully meeting the challenge of recommendation three will also take time. There will be much trial and error, and inevitable challenges along the road. Working transparently with your residents and colleagues to scrutinise your progress along this road is the only way of understanding whether you are delivering on the potential of the BSHR, and improving repairs and maintenance outcomes for your residents.





# Working in partnership with contractors and service providers

(Re)procuring a repairs and maintenance service is one of the most important opportunities you have to improve outcomes for your residents. Our research has found significant examples of good practice in procurement and contract management, but also instances of things going wrong.

Based on our engagement with residents, housing providers, contractors, and service providers, we have devised ten good practice principles to follow when you are designing and procuring a new repairs and maintenance service.

These principles are split into three groups: 1) early market engagement and procurement, 2) building a sustainable relationship with good working practices, and 3) practicing continuous improvement.

Not all of these principles will apply in all cases. For example, engaging the wider market may not be appropriate if you are transitioning to an in-house repairs and maintenance team, and the principles of monitoring the market and designing your contract structure are less likely to be relevant to in-house repairs and maintenance teams. Nonetheless, there are learnings from this work that are applicable to the delivery of repairs and maintenance services however they are delivered, and we would welcome examples of how you are putting these principles into practice in your own organisation.

## Early market engagement and procurement

### 1) Give a greater emphasis in your procurement activities to communicating and aligning your core values, vision, and purpose with a service provider

Social landlords are increasingly placing greater emphasis on making sure that the operatives delivering their repairs and maintenance services (whether external service providers or in-house teams) are aligned to their core vision, values, and purpose.

If you are setting up an in-house team, you can actively shape its core vision, values, and purpose to align it with your organisation. When procuring for external service providers, taking the time to explain your vision, values and purpose to prospective bidders can help you both make decisions as to whether you can work effectively together.

### 2) Engage the market before finalising your specification when procuring

When procuring for external service providers, engaging the market before finalising your tender specification is a critical step to ensuring it is realistic, costed appropriately, deliverable, and attractive to prospective bidders. Research by the National Housing Maintenance Forum (the NHMF) found that service providers can and do provide feedback on elements of a draft specification that are risk, challenging to deliver, or misguided.

Furthermore, because pre-market engagement can lead to better specification design and the most appropriate kind of contract being utilised, it can receive more interest from service providers, not least because they are aware of it and have been involved in its development.

### 3) Ensure that residents and colleagues from across the organisation can be centrally involved in the procurement process

Involving a wide range of residents and colleagues in the procurement process from the beginning can be enormously beneficial to delivering good outcomes for residents. This applies whether you are procuring for an external service provider, or bringing your repairs and maintenance services in-house.

When including colleagues from across the organisation, it is especially important to involve not only the teams who will be managing and facilitating the contract, but also relevant colleagues from areas of the organisation with responsibility for safeguarding; equality, diversity, and inclusion; contact centre operations, and more widely. Including a wide range of colleagues can help you ensure that the service provider(s) you appoint are sufficiently experienced to understanding safeguarding, resident needs and vulnerabilities, and other crucial aspects of delivery that are important to achieving good outcomes for all residents.

Residents should also be involved right at the start of this journey, and the most effective part of the process that residents can influence is the specification of the service and how different elements of tender responses should be prioritised and scored. Critically, residents will require training to understand what procurement is and how they can be involved.

There are different approaches to doing this, which will vary across different social landlords. Some landlords we have engaged with have involved residents in setting the specification and scoring criteria, but then found their residents did not feel the need to be involved in the actual interview and scoring process itself.

Others have invited groups of residents to attend pre-specification market engagement workshops, so prospective bidders can understand their views and how they should aim to meet them when they respond to a later tender. Others have involved residents in contract negotiation meetings, noting that this gives them a clear understanding of whether the vision and values of the contractor aligns with the needs of their residents.

However you do this, establishing a process for involving your residents in the procurement and appointment of contractors is critical, and this is also true if you are redesigning your in-house repairs and maintenance services.

### 4) Build your partnership for the long-term

The establishment of long-term relationships, whether they are with an external service provider or an in-house repairs and maintenance service, offer multiple opportunities to continually improve delivery and value for money.

For service providers, a commitment to a long-term relationship encourages inward investment in areas that are a priority to the client (e.g. safeguarding training for operatives) and encourages the germination of genuine partnerships, rather than adversarial or 'parachute' relationships, whereby service providers 'drop in' and deliver a short contract with the minimum endeavour. It also provides welcome financial certainty.

Focusing on the establishment of a long-term partnership also allows external service providers and in-house teams to develop a deep, detailed understanding of the homes and residents they are serving, enabling added value to be realised by applying their expertise and experience in certain situations (for example, being able to predict issues in certain home archetypes based on previous work).





### Building a sustainable relationship with good working practices

#### 5) Balance risk and reward fairly in your contract structure

Research by the NHMF has investigated the underlying reasons behind the collapse of several longstanding service providers since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. The NHMF noted that when procuring works and services, there are opportunities for social landlords to structure contracts in a way that spreads the risk and reward fairly between landlords and service providers. Specifically, landlords should look to practice the following when putting together a contract:

- Thinking carefully about tender validity periods, specifically how long a price must be held by bidders. The NHMF noted that fixed price contracts were a significant factor in the collapse of many service providers in recent years.
- Using collaborative contractual models that provide transparency of costs, and which offer discreet mechanisms to address difficult issues when they are encountered.
- Practicing fair risk transfer, especially avoiding legal terms that transfer risk unfairly, without liability caps and with unreasonable penalties.
- Putting in place an agreement to collaboratively monitor the market to understand any potential market conditions that might affect the delivery of the contract.

#### 6) Agree the outlines of your working relationship prior to the commencement of a contract, and agree to review this on a pre-defined basis

Our research with contractors and service providers has highlighted that many of the common issues that arise in a contract are 'baked in' from the beginning, or partly arise from inadequate planning after a tender has been awarded, but before the commencement of the contract. There are several things that social landlords can do to address this before contract commencement, in partnership with their service providers:

- Agree communication protocols and practices and commit to reviewing how they are working across the duration of a contract.
- Have a plan in place for business continuity, to ensure that staff churn or key members of staff leaving their posts does not affect delivery.

- Agree a collaborative approach to how challenges and problems will be considered and addressed.
- Discuss whether there are any areas of service delivery that the contractor or service provider has specific expertise, and which could be used to positively shape delivery in the future.
- Collaboratively agree respective roles and responsibilities on data collection, analysis, and reporting.

#### 7) Ensure contract managers have the right skill set

Once a procurement process has concluded, the commencement of a contract and its transition to a contract manager is critical for success. Contract managers need to have the right skill sets to have the technical, legal, and financial knowledge to understand and report on contract management and performance, but they also need to be able to manage relationships and develop rapport with service providers.

Providing appropriate CPD opportunities and supporting contract managers to develop these skills will undoubtedly lead to the better management and delivery of repairs and maintenance contracts, improving outcomes for all parties, not least your residents.

### Practicing continuous improvement

#### 8) Give your service providers the opportunity to learn from each other about how to best serve your residents

Housing providers deliver multiple different kinds of property services. This includes repairs and maintenance, gas works and compliance, building and fire safety works, retrofit works, and more general estate maintenance and management. These services are often delivered by a mosaic of different service providers, including external contractors, smaller specialist providers, and in-house teams.

However, although they perform different services, they all work in the same communities with the same residents. You should therefore give your different service providers a space to share good practice and exchange information about how they can best serve your residents and communities. This can be especially valuable for new service providers joining a landlord for the first time, as it enables them to learn from incumbent providers working across different services.

### 9) Work together to understand how internal processes affect service provider performance on the frontline, and how it might affect your KPIs

Processes, systems, and procedures internal to a landlord can unintentionally affect the ability of service providers to deliver efficient and accurate repairs and maintenance services in individual homes. Our research has found that this can affect core KPIs, especially pivotal indicators such as first-time fix rates and instances of no access. For example, unclear or incomplete diagnosis at call control can result in repeat visits for operatives as they discover they do not have the tools or parts to fix the exact issue once they reach the home.

Landlords, service providers, and in-house teams should therefore work together to review and better understand how internal processes filter through the chain to affect the delivery of repairs and maintenance services on the ground. They should then work together to devise pre-agreed mitigations and steps to ensure that a) the possibility of this happening is minimised, and b) any instances that do happen do not detrimentally affect the key metrics the service provider is held to.

### 10) Work collaboratively with your residents, colleagues, and service providers to review your service performance openly

The BSHR concluded with a call for social landlords to work with residents and colleagues to undertake an annual review of progress made against each of its six core recommendations. It highlighted that for the recommendations to drive meaningful change in social housing, landlords should enable and empower residents and colleagues to examine how well they are doing in terms of implementing them, including pinpointing how any challenges or barriers can be overcome.

Contractors, service providers, and in-house repairs teams should also be centrally involved in annual reviews. They bring a unique perspective, and giving them the space to speak openly about what is working well, and what is not, can support continuous improvement on an annual basis.





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