



The partnership encouraged the training of young people as part of the project

Walsall Housing Group Customer Liaison – Meeting Customers Needs

Contractors:	Frank Haslam Milan Ltd, Astraseal Ltd, G. Purchase Construction Ltd, Wates Construction Ltd, Superior Plumbing Installations, Nationwide Windows (UK) Ltd, Select Home Improvements, Octopus Electrical Ltd
Client:	Walsall Housing Group
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Sector:	Housing
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Project timescales:	December 2002 – March 2008
Themes:	Improving existing stock, design and customer satisfaction

The Walsall Strategic Partnership Customer Liaison project is an excellent example of how a group of contractors and supply chain partners and a Registered Social Landlord client have co-operated to improve the service to their tenants and the local community.

Walsall Housing Group (WHG) was formed following a successful large-scale voluntary transfer of stock from the Local Authority in 2003. The Group covers 22,800 homes over five Housing Trusts:

- Aldridge & Brownhills Housing Trust
- Bloxwich Housing Trust
- Central Housing Trust
- Daralaston Housing Trust and
- Willenhall Housing Trust

These trusts cover the five geographical areas of Walsall and each has its own directorate with central support. The customer Client Liaison function is provided by the Group.

Part of the success of the stock transfer was the promise of large-scale programmes of planned maintenance and refurbishment to bring the stock up to the Decent Homes standard. This equated to a £211m programme of work over five years. To this end the mission statement for WHG, "Keeping our Promises", demonstrates their commitment to the work. As such, it was clear from a very early stage of the process that resident involvement and feedback in the process would be critical to the long-term success of the project.

Customer Liaison and Quality Management

A Customer Liaison/Quality Unit (CLU) was formed from some of the members of the Council that were involved in the stock transfer. This unit took responsibility for the implementation and monitoring of customer related issues for WHG and consulted other organisations to establish best practice examples in liaising with customers and calculating resident satisfaction. This work provided the foundations for the processes and systems adopted.

Eight partners were appointed in early 2003, following a selection process based 60% on quality and 40% on cost. The work was let on a package basis with constructors undertaking works within the five trusts under the following headings:

- Kitchen and Bathroom
- Central Heating
- Windows
- Rewires

Constructor Partners

- 1) Astraseal Ltd
- 2) Frank Haslam Milan Ltd
- 3) G Purchase Construction Ltd
- 4) Nationwide Windows (UK) Ltd
- 5) Octopus Electrical Ltd
- 6) Select Home Improvements
- 7) Superior Plumbing Installation
- 8) Wates Construction Ltd

Following the appointment of the eight partners, a Customer Liaison Forum (CLF) was set up specifically to develop the Customer Liaison process for the project. The CLF was chaired by a leading figure from the CLU and had representation from each of the eight partner organisations. This forum was the driving force for the development and implementation of the customer liaison process including the production of the survey forms and data collection, with all the member organisations working mutually for the benefit of the project. The key consideration was to develop a process that could be both generic to all constructors and also able to take account of differences in work content between major programmes.

Customer Liaison Process

1) Objectives

One of the main drivers for the Customer Liaison Forum (CLF) was the desire to create a single adaptable methodology which could generate the highest possible level of 'live' customer feedback. This would involve the creation of meaningful measures which could be used to develop works specifications tailored to customer needs as well as providing a model of best practice and a culture of information sharing between the contractors and supply chain partners. It would also bring together constructors with different ways of working and widely different services.

2) Data Collection and Access

The CLF developed standard resident satisfaction forms specific to each of the four works packages which are used by all eight constructors to enable direct comparison and internal benchmarking. The data is collected by each constructor's Client Liaison Officer, with the forms issued on a monthly basis by WHG so that updates and alterations can be easily included.



The Customer Liaison Officer's role is key to the success of the project

Client Liaison Officers complete the forms with the residents within two days of completion of the works (although in some circumstances forms are left for residents to complete and return direct to the relevant partner). This ensures that the resident has a fresh recollection of the work being carried out and that any issues are captured. The form is designed to measure both the resident's satisfaction with the service and also the level of satisfaction with the customer liaison process itself. Client Liaison Officers enter the data directly onto the 'SNAP' IT system, using a standard template (see below). Questionnaires are constantly refined by removing confusing statements and adding relevant details.

The system aims to place the ultimate customer, the resident, at the centre of the process and the data and comments collected are used to drive forward the overall liaison process. Residents are given access to summaries of all customer satisfaction data for environmental works, with more detailed reports available on request.

3) Data processing and reporting

Data is transferred back to WHG's central database via coded e-mail, from where it is collated. The format in which the data is held makes it easily retrievable and reports can be generated at almost any level.

The adoption of the *SNAP* survey software allows constructors to easily download customer satisfaction data which forms the basis of the monthly reports. In turn, these reports are used to develop 'rolling benchmarks' for the measurement of Key Performance Indicator (KPI) performance. *SNAP* has also resulted in reduced administrative costs compared to individual constructors procuring the information themselves.

Reports are generated at various levels:

By Trust – each of the five Trusts is provided with a monthly report of the performance of each constructor. These results are also issued to all the constructors and reporting is completely open.

Merged six-monthly report – a detailed report is issued on a six-monthly basis, merging all the data from the five Trusts to provide overall performance data on customer satisfaction by work-type. The results from the merged data are used to set the benchmark targets for the following six months of the project and performance against the benchmark scores is detailed in this report.

Environmental works resident feedback – A summary of the results is included in individual Trust newsletters and is also distributed to the residents via A5 flyers. These flyers include details on how residents can access the full report. To date the take up has been around 15%. This process is now being rolled out to the other packages of work.

4) Monitoring and acting on the results

The reporting process provides a constant stream of live data to the CLU, which monitors the results on a daily basis. This enables any potential problem areas to be highlighted instantly and the Customer Liaison Manager can take any necessary steps to remedy a situation before it escalates. Discussions with the relevant constructors usually prove sufficient to resolve any problems that have arisen since the process was adopted. However, in addition, there is also a process in place to generate supplementary audit forms, which are issued by WHG to the resident, to highlight areas that may need specific attention.

Constructors are encouraged to own and manage their own KPIs and performance proactively rather than relying on traditional methods of

reacting to clients performance reports. This aims to achieve continuous improvements in house, as well as active sharing of experiences to develop wider best practice.

One of the primary KPIs is achieving zero defects at handover and this is being achieved. Continuous liaison with the customers, from an early stage, ensures that problems are communicated to the production teams at the earliest possible opportunity which reduces the necessity for any additional work and results in significant efficiency savings.

5) Benchmarking

The use of rolling benchmarks, set on a six-monthly basis, enables WHG to benchmark the performance of the eight partners on Customer Satisfaction and Liaison, not only against their own performance from the previous six months, but also against the other seven partners, many of whom are undertaking similar work. This ensures that the internal benchmarking is on a "like-for-like" basis.

6) Sharing Knowledge

The level of data provided back to the constructors enables them to take necessary action against any areas of under performance as well as allowing them to share good practice with the other constructor partners. The process is completely transparent and data is freely shared amongst the eight partners. It has also been extensively independently audited and validated by FSquared Ltd as part of an overall audit of the Partnering Agreement set up in March 2004.

Knowledge sharing has been further enhanced through a process of structured secondment of Client Liaison Officers between the constructions and supply chain members and WHG to increase awareness of each other's businesses and knowledge of the wider partnership. All partner CLOs are invited to a two-day induction by the CLM to ensure they are all adopting the same working methods, particularly for their interface with the residents.

Outcomes

- To date, the Customer Liaison Process has resulted in a focussed team ethic and has revealed very high levels of customer satisfaction (97% for products; 95% for service provided). The customer response rate has been 63% out of 14,000 individual home improvements.
- Walsall Strategic Partnership (WSP) has hosted seminars on Customer Liaison through Partnering and is also setting up a Customer Liaison Best Practice Club.
- Four of the constructors involved have used the WSP processes to provide the same level of service for partnering clients elsewhere.
- All of the Partnership's contractors and supply chain partners have adopted policies and initiatives that reflect the agenda set by Rethinking Construction and the Egan Report.
- Equality and diversity in employment is monitored on a quarterly basis and WHG's Equal Opportunities and Diversity Manager is invited to take an active role within the function of the Customer Liaison Forum.
- The framework partner have complete ownership of the process and all have benefited from the development of the process.



Best Practice in customers' homes

The Future

- The processes adopted for this project are now being replicated for a number of other services offered by WHG, including gas servicing, training, cleaning and call centre performance.
- The CLF is introducing hand-held PDAs across the project with a direct link to the central database, allowing much faster transfer of data to the central database.

"The implementation of the Customer Liaison process at WHG has been hugely successful and has added value not only to the residents of Walsall but also to the eight partner organisations, all of whom have used the level of data provided to them to drive business improvement through their organisation.

The method adopted demonstrates that a process built around mutual development of systems and processes ensures the buy-in of all parties and has led to the extremely high return rates in excess of 60%.

Of all the KPIs measured on any project it is clear that Resident Satisfaction is the clearest indication of the Constructors overall performance."

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**CONSTRUCTING
EXCELLENCE**
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Constructing Excellence
in the Built Environment
Wanwick House,
25 Buckingham Palace Road,
London SW1W 0PP

T 0845 605 5556 E helpdesk@constructingexcellence.org.uk
W www.constructingexcellence.org.uk

Albert Charles, Albert F Charles Consulting
E albertcharles@hotmail.co.uk