



Shifting thinking: emerging approaches to customer service delivery in housing

With **Your Call**

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Introduction

Omfax Systems

Omfax Systems is a leading provider of information solutions for customer services within social housing.



Omfax offers a range of innovative products and services that support customer service professionals within social housing. These solutions provide clarity, consistency and efficiency to improve communication between landlords and residents.

Established in 1989, Omfax is known throughout the social housing sector for its Keyfax Inter•View software, as well as handbooks, guides and eLearning; all created specifically to respond to the communication challenges of social housing organisations, from housing associations to ALMOs.

Keyfax Inter•View software provides the benchmark for call management systems, enabling contact centres to offer first class service to customers. By providing Dynamic Call Flow Navigation, Keyfax Inter•View expands advisors' ability to deal with each and every enquiry, increases first call resolution rates, improves the accuracy of call outcomes and helps to reduce the costs of everyday service delivery.

Your Call

Omfax developed Your Call as a showcase for innovation in customer service, enabling the sharing of best practice and providing insight into trends and issues affecting customer service professionals working in social housing.



Set up in 2015, the Your Call events have been held regularly throughout England over the last year and most recently for the first time in Scotland in 2016. They bring together senior customer service professionals working in housing and are an opportunity to network. The Your Call events are also a forum to share best practice and find out about more innovation, particularly looking at current challenges and opportunities facing the social housing sector.



Profile

Peter Graddon is the Director of Omfax Systems he founded in 1989, initially producing the Jobfax Repairs Manual for front-line staff, which was then launched on computer in 1998. Version four of this product was rebranded as Keyfax Inter-View.

Peter's previous experience includes consultancy work with Albourne Associates, Head of Housing at Tamworth Borough Council, Assistant Director Housing at Leicester City Council and Economist at Norwich City Council.



Peter Graddon (centre) Founder - Omfax Systems



Executive Summary

The social housing sector is facing a perfect storm. A combination of the roll-out of universal credit, the lowering of the benefit cap, capping social rents at local housing allowance rates and the fact that housing associations have been left to 'plug the gap' as other public services have been cut, means that most associations are seeing an increase in the overall volume of contact. Throw in the uncertainty in housing and construction markets with the 1% rent reduction and the shift to smarter solutions, new ways of thinking which deliver Value for Money become self-evident.

With ever emerging digital platforms which we access every day and the reach of social media, customers have never had more information at their fingertips. Customer expectations of the services they receive are higher than ever before and as customer needs become more complex more pressure is placed on front line teams.

Positively, most associations have recognised that the scale of the challenge presents an opportunity to be more, not less, customer focused; to use new mechanisms of engagement and to better exploit technology – and many are instigating, or accelerating, customer centric transformation projects and programmes for this reason.

Increasing levels of professionalism within customer service centres over the last few years will of course help. Some associations are already well on the journey to integrated, multi-channel service delivery – but the overall picture is inconsistent. Others recognise that by using smarter, more customer centric measures such as avoidable contact, they can identify and deal with issues far earlier, achieving greater efficiency – as well as improving customer satisfaction.

However, disjointed IT systems that don't allow a single view of the customer and operating structures that aren't built around customer processes still present barriers to consistently high quality service delivery. Unsophisticated reporting tools and a lack of relevant data to support effective decision making, simply compound the issue further.

Your Call was set up by Omfax and has been operating over the course of the last year as a forum for customer service professionals to consider the role of technology and training in overcoming some of these challenges. During the last few months, Omfax has contacted more than 1,000 senior customer service professionals from across the social housing sector. The following report pulls together responses from that survey alongside wider industry trend data to give a snapshot of the state of customer service in social housing in 2016. Omfax has also gathered experts and innovators from inside and outside of the housing sector to share their thoughts on this shift.



Shifting thinking: emerging approaches to customer service delivery in housing

Contact volumes

Overall, the sector has seen a growth in contact volumes with 83% of associations reporting a small but significant increase in enquiries by an average of just under 5% over the past three years.

In 2016, the average contact centre dealt with 130,000 enquiries per year. However, volumes vary depending on the size of the stock managed, with the smallest centres surveyed handling less than 30,000 contacts per year and the largest in excess of 250,000.

An increase in housing stock was reported by 63% of respondents, however there are significant variations in the volume of calls per unit of stock across the sector, with an average of 11 calls per unit of stock.

With an average of nearly four repairs carried out per property per year, this suggests that some 30% of repair calls were follow-ups about existing repairs – avoidable calls.

On average, the ratio of advisors to units of stock was one to 470, with each member of staff typically responding to 5,300 enquiries across the year.

“Although you’d expect to see contact volumes increase in line with stock volumes, the significant variation between the number of calls per unit of stock suggests that there is more that can be done to improve efficiency and that sharing learning across the sector remains important.”

Peter Graddon, Founder - Your Call



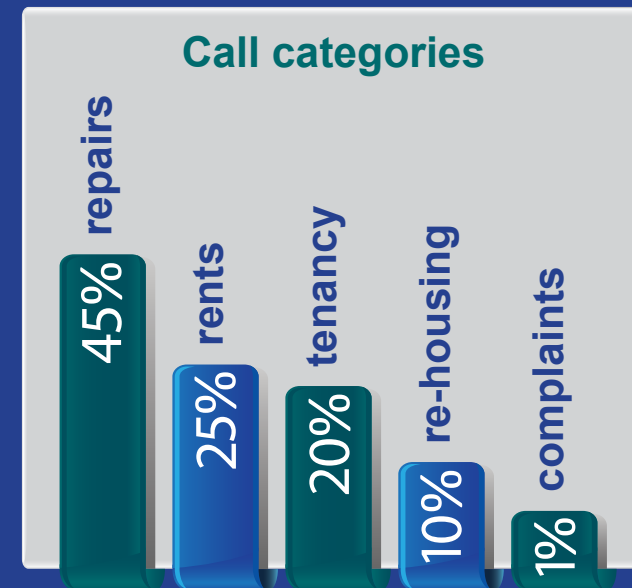
Contact volumes up 5%



11 calls per home
(Contact volumes range from 1.5 per unit to 28.5 per unit)



35% offer full services 24/7
65% offer emergency only 24/7



Digital services

The way people connect with service providers is changing – and changing rapidly. Over the past ten years the time adults spend using the internet has increased substantially, both at home and elsewhere – greatly stimulated by the use of smartphones and tablets, ‘always on!’ The estimated number of hours spent online per week has more than doubled since 2006, from around ten to more than 20 hours.

In recent years, there has also been a significant growth in the personalisation of customer contact and also in online services, with increasing numbers of housing associations enabling integrated online services via a customer portal as well as SMS to, for example, confirm and track repairs appointments.

Digital services across multiple platforms are becoming more prominent in housing associations as the power of digital becomes ever more intense.

What we own



66%

66% of adults own a smartphone - up 27% from 2012



54%

54% of households have a tablet - up 10% from 2014



65%

65% of households own a laptop



93%

93% of adults have a mobile phone



60%

60% of adults access the internet through their mobile phone

How we use it

29%

29% of adults check their phones within five minutes of waking



50%

50% of young people (age 18-24) check their phones within five minutes of waking



42%

42% of adults pay bills online



72%

72% of internet users have a social media profile



20%

20% of Facebook users go on the site more than ten times a day

10% of Twitter users go on the site more than ten times a day



10%



25%

25% of adults with a Twitter account use it to complain

Social Housing - digital by default?

The Government push towards services that are 'digital by default' is well understood, but progress across the housing sector remains stubbornly slow. This has often been hampered by years of under-investment in IT, legacy IT infrastructures that aren't easy to integrate, messy data and in some cases, confusion about where to start. When coupled with a culture that this is 'not for us' or a belief that this is not what tenants want and management that may have limited personal experience in using such systems, it is not surprising that progress is slow.

Customer interaction can also be made more complex by processes that remain stubbornly wedded to organisational structures rather than that operate in the customer interest. Delegates at our Your Call events gave examples including a Communications Team managing the social media channel, but passing the majority of enquiries back to Customer Services to be dealt with and websites that were not structured to support channel shift, despite this being a business objective.

"When I look at lots of housing provider's websites quite oftenyou're thinking, where on earth's the 'pay your rent' button or log your repair? Oh, it's down here somewhere....When you go on Amazon, the 'checkout' button is not down the bottom somewhere; it's in your face all the time...we've just got to get the bread and butter right." Tony Smith, Acutance Consulting

Does your customer service centre manage social media?



45% of associations have a dedicated web portal for customers to access their housing account and related services. Compared with any other customer focus industry, this is disappointing.

Multi-channel contact remains important

Despite a clear move towards digital, 80% of respondents to the Your Call survey said that their contact centre is more important to the organisation than it was three years ago.

The increased pressure on customers as a result of welfare reform, the diversification of services into new areas such as care and the movement of high volume, low complexity transactions online, has led to many contact centres dealing with calls that are more complex and customers that are more vulnerable than previously.

With Go On identifying that 23% of adults don't have basic digital skills, contact centres also remain an important channel for those that are digitally excluded.

Is your contact centre more or less important to the organisation than its was three years ago?

more

80%

less

20%



1 in 4
adults don't have
basic digital skills



60%
of social housing
residents don't have
access to the internet

People

The Your Call survey indicated that the vast majority of customer service centres consist of generic staff able to answer any type of enquiry, with 18% splitting their centres into specialisms, mainly to cover repairs diagnosis.

The debate over using specialist or generic staff continues with strong advocates on both sides. What remains obviously important is the level of knowledge of advisors to be able to handle calls at the first point of contact.

Despite increases in call volumes, staffing levels have remained broadly stable, and respondents to the survey considered this to be likely into the near future.

'Stay the same but staff will be doing different things.'

'I'd expect staffing levels to stay the same.'

Over the last three years, the majority of contact centres reported making an investment in staff training and 70% will invest again this year. However, participants at Your Call events in 2016 indicated that the nature of the training may change to reflect the need for employees to understand and embrace digital.

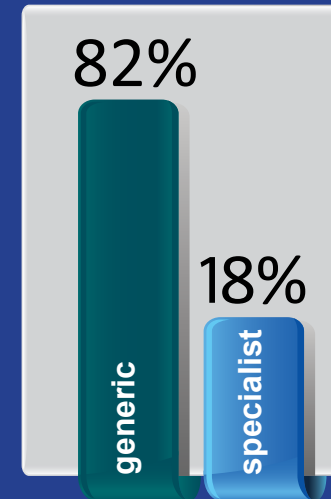
"The staff are not all confident.... some of the customers are probably far more IT knowledgeable than some of our staff.....you've got to put that training in before you can even go out and try and get the customers to embrace the changes as well, so your staff are key to start with. It's no good having the systems and having everything in place if your staff are not on board and are not capable to do it." Participant, Your Call event

Recruitment was another area that many felt was in need of change, with participants commenting on the need for new ways of working in this area:

"We need to change the way in which we recruit to get the best possible people into the organisation.....recruiting should be for attitude rather than, we've got housing knowledge, we've got repairs knowledge, because you can train around a lot of that. You can't train attitude."

"In our team, we set up assessment centres for customer services vacancies, so rather than just coming along for a 20-minute interview, it's a two-hour process which includes testing people's face-to-face skills, doing a telephone call, role play, a written assessment, an in-tray exercise and an interview as all part of the whole."

% of generic to specialist staff in housing contact centres



Metrics

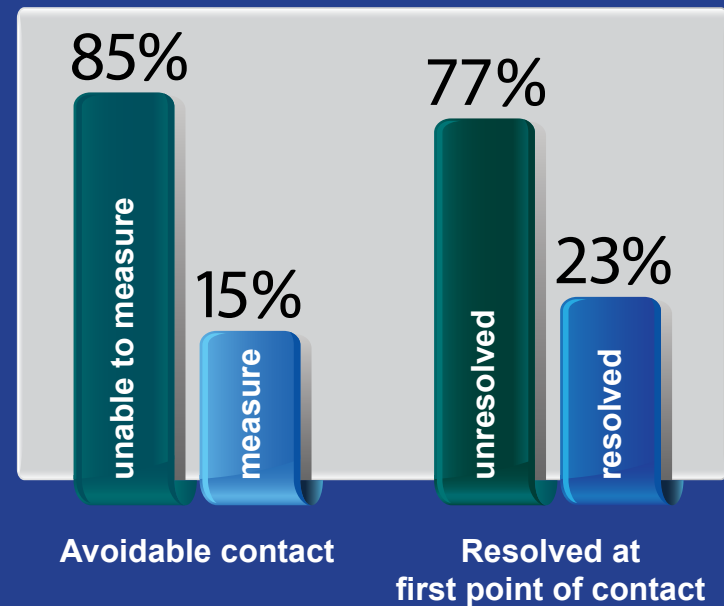
While most contact centres are well versed in measuring average speed of answer, call abandonment rate and average talk and wrap times, fewer are using more meaningful metrics to identify avoidable contact and first contact resolution – and fewer still are triangulating these metrics to deliver real insight into areas for improvement.

With only 23% of calls being resolved at first point of contact and only 15% of housing associations actively monitoring avoidable contact, there is significant scope to improve reporting capability within the customer service function that can help to identify waste within processes overall.

As budgets are squeezed, there is an opportunity to put customer service at the heart of the efficiency agenda. The day-to-day contact with customers means that customer service staff are usually the first to know when things aren't working. But knowing that and capturing the data that allows actionable insights to be formed are two different things. If we are serious about being as efficient as we can be solid data capture and real time reporting capability become mission critical.

Barry Marlow, CIHCM: *“My work is now deeply involved with behavioural insight, studying and measuring change in the way we do things. Small changes, not huge strategic changes that worry people. To your customer, this incremental approach of small, bite-sized shift could be the difference they need. With welfare reforms, this kind of shift could mean social landlords are better equipped to collect £millions of universal credit.”*

With only 15% of housing associations actively monitoring avoidable contact and only 23% of calls being resolved at first point of contact, there is significant scope to improve overall reporting capability within the customer service function that can help to identify waste within processes.



Conclusion

When people are asked to name the issues most affecting the country, outside the current analysis of issues as a result of the EU referendum, in recent times immigration and health/the NHS have been declared the two most important. Just below them however, there is one issue – housing - that continues to rise in significance; more important than education, employment and cuts in public service.

Tragically, as part of this crisis, social housing is at risk. It is under threat from Government policies, the current funding climate and from forces within. The Chartered Institute of Housing estimates there will be a net loss of more than 400,000 social rent homes by 2020. This is a staggering figure given the increasing demand, yet too many are allowing this to happen.

And, underlying all this, is the quality of service provided by social housing. Customer service professionals have indicated a collective commitment to the highest standards of service, provided by all, so that a few are not allowed to tarnish the reputation others are striving to build. Social housing needs to provide and finance an independent regulator to ensure standards are met.

The fact is that good customer service is now expected by all - it's not a 'nice to have', it's a minimum that is expected - and for many people it is a clear indication of how an organisation is performing more widely. It's about giving the same commitment and importance to measuring your performance on social values, as you do to measuring performance on our other business objectives.

Omfax Systems provides solutions that can help housing associations to become more efficient and effective, including:

- Dynamic call navigation
- Smart reporting capability
- Service personalisation

By focusing on enabling consistent and intelligent service delivery and solid reporting, Omfax works with a large number of clients across the housing sector to do more with less.

Omfax can help deliver more consistent services and to improve customer satisfaction while reducing costs

To find out more visit www.omfax.co.uk or call 01869 242967

About Omfax

Established in 1989, Omfax Systems has become known throughout the social housing sector for our Keyfax Inter•View software, handbooks, guides and e-learning; all created specifically to respond to the customer service communication challenges of social housing organisations.

Keyfax Inter•View enables social housing contact centres to better serve their residents. By providing Dynamic Call Flow Navigation, Keyfax Inter•View improves the advisors' ability to deal with each and every enquiry, increasing first call resolution rates, improving the accuracy of call outcomes, and helping to reduce the costs of everyday housing maintenance and management. Keyfax Inter•View can also provide residents with on-line self-service, so they can report a problem or raise a query at a time that is convenient for them, and still get the same quality of service.

We work with a large number of clients across the housing sector in the UK and in Europe. We provide solutions that can help customer services to become more efficient and effective. By focusing on enabling consistent and intelligent service delivery and reporting, we can help you to do more with less - let us help you with your next step.

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