



The Changing Face of Customer Service in the Housing Sector



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Your Call – because customer service matters

The social housing sector is facing a perfect storm. While customer expectations have never been higher, customer needs are becoming more complex, in turn, placing increased pressure on front-line teams.

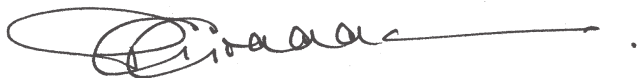
A combination of the roll-out of universal credit, the lowering of the benefit cap, the 1% rent reduction and the fact that housing associations have been left to 'plug the gap' as other public services have been cut, means that most associations are seeing an increase in the overall volume of contact. Throw in the the introduction of 'pay to stay' and the need for smarter solutions and new ways of working becomes self-evident.

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

The increasing professionalism of customer services in recent years is an important development. Some associations are also well on the journey to integrated, multi-channel service delivery. Others recognise that by using smarter, more customer focussed measures, such as avoidable contact, they can identify and deal with issues far earlier, achieving greater efficiency - as well as improving customer satisfaction. But the overall picture is inconsistent.

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 in 2015 as a forum for customer service professionals to consider the role of technology and training in overcoming some of these challenges. In late 2015, we contacted more than 1,000 senior customer service professionals across the social housing sector. The following report pulls together responses from that survey, alongside wider industry trend data, to give a snapshot on the status of customer service in social housing at the start of 2016.



Peter Graddon - Director (Omfax Systems)

Contact volumes

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 2015, the average contact centre dealt with 130,000 enquiries per year. Volumes of course 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.

The volume of calls per unit of stock also varies considerably across the sector, with an average of 11 calls per unit of stock. With repairs averaging 4 repairs per property per year, it is apparent that contrary to expectations, the bulk of calls are either querying an existing repair or about a rent or tenancy issue.

On average, the ratio of advisors to units of stock was 1 to 470, with each member of staff typically responding to 5,300 enquiries across the year — that represents over 14 calls 365 days a year.



Contact volumes up 5%



11 calls per home

(Contact volumes range from 1.5 per unit to 28.5 per unit)



staff homes



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

“The pressure on customer services is evident. The range of enquiries being handled, the expectation of a resolution at first point of contact, the expansion of contact services and the growth of social media, coupled with resource limitations and demands to minimise call times, are all contributing to the realisation that the status of customer services within social housing organisations needs more focus than ever before.”

Peter Graddon - Your Call Founder

Digital services

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% 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



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

Social Housing - digital by default?

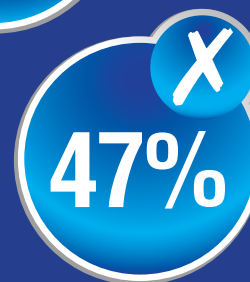
The way people connect with service providers is changing – and changing rapidly. Over the past ten years, the time adults spend using the internet has increased substantially, both at home and elsewhere. The estimated number of hours spent online per week has more than doubled since 2005, from around ten to over 20 hours.

In recent years there has also been a significant growth in the personalisation of customer contact and online services, and the Government's push towards services that are 'digital by default' is well understood. However, progress across the housing sector remains stubbornly slow, often hampered by the lack of up-to-date IT skills and resources, legacy IT infrastructures that aren't easy to integrate, IT systems geared to back office rather than customer service operations, messy data and, in some cases, confusion about where to start.

Customer interaction is also made more complex by processes that remain stubbornly wedded to organisational structures, rather than operating in 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 often...you'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."

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.

Tony Smith, Acutance Consulting

Multi-channel contact remains important

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

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, reflecting the greater role customer services centres are now playing. It may also reflect the lack of alternatives for customer contact.

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



1 in 4
adults don't have
basic digital skills

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

more

80%

less

20%

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.

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 2015 indicated that the nature of the training may change to reflect the need for employees to understand and embrace digital.

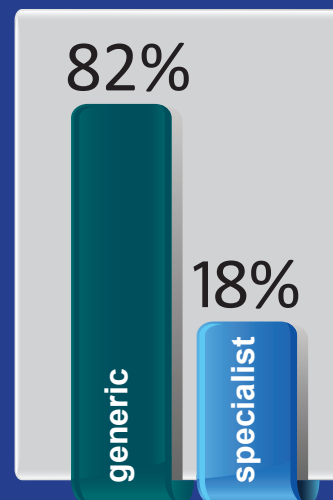
"The staff are not all confident....some of the customers are probably far more IT knowledgeable than some of our staff.....you've got to put that training in before you can even go out and try and get the customers to embrace the changes as well, so your staff are key to start with. It's no good having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

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.....one of the big things that's come out of that is about recruiting 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."

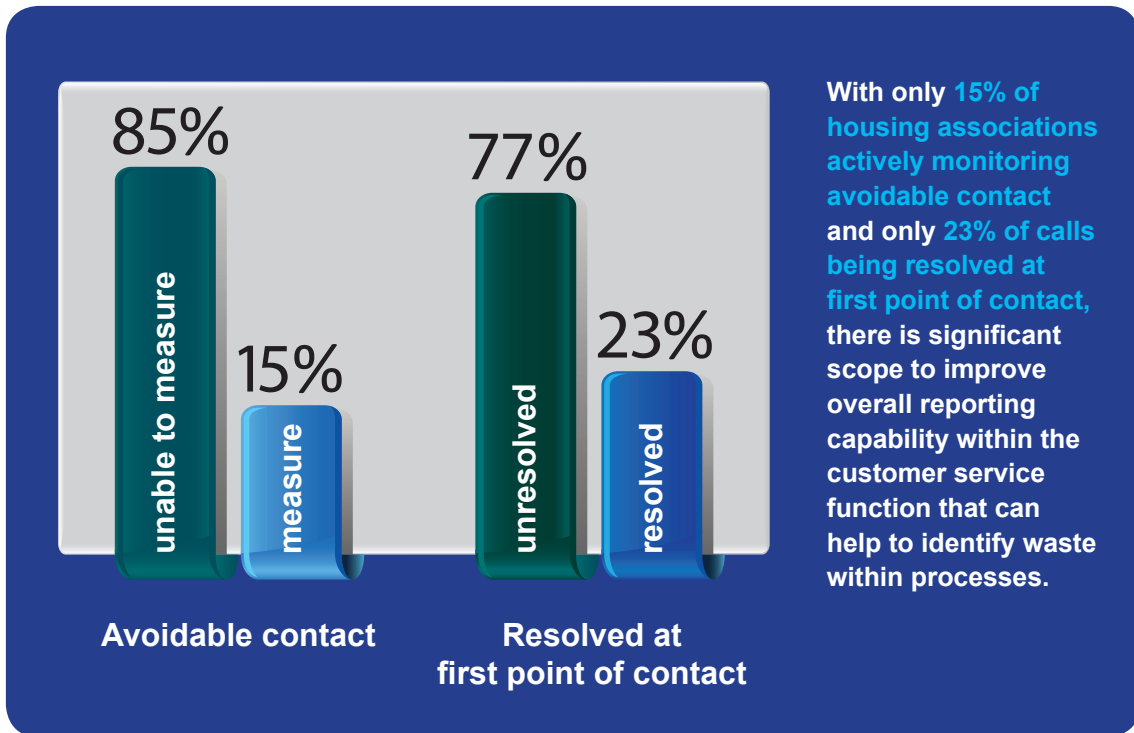
% of generic to specialist staff in housing contact centres



Metrics

While most contact centres are well versed in measuring average answer speed, call abandonment rate and average talk and wrap times, fewer are using more meaningful measures to identify avoidable contact and first contact resolution – and fewer still are correlating these measures 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 overall reporting capability within the customer service function that can help to identify waste within processes.



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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