

**City of Lincoln Council tear up the rule book to the delight of their housing tenants**

It's no secret that the public sector is currently under heavy pressure from central government. It's likely that many councils will have to cut their budgets by 15-20% at the end of the year. The question that is on the mind of most council executives is "how?" Many are contemplating reducing front line services or cutting staff. The City of Lincoln Council has opted for a different approach; one which is not only delivering great service and budget results but is also proving popular with customers and front line staff.

When City Council director John Bibby set out to improve the council's housing repairs service to their 8,000 homes, he knew it needed a fresh approach. However even he was surprised when he found out just how much needed changed.

It was taking up to 33 days to complete a repair – they took it down to just 4 days. Only 45% of repairs were successfully completed on the first visit – the overhaul got this up to 90%. Many follow on repairs were getting lost in the system and that's been improved too. What's more the delighted tenants are now kept informed of what is going to be done and when. Productivity has gone up by 60% and costs are down.

However, as Bibby states, "The story is not that we were bad, most councils are not much better, it's what we did to fix it that raised a few eyebrows!"

Making changes on this scale would normally be left to management but working in conjunction with Systems Thinking management consultancy firm Vanguard Scotland Ltd, the City Council Director let its own front line staff conduct the analysis of the business and make recommendations for change. As head of service Russell Clarke, who led the team said, "Front line staff know most about what's wrong with a service, so it made sense to have them heavily involved in the change."

Getting the front line staff to help decide what to change was unusual enough but in a further upset to established practice, Vanguard also recommended that the most experienced staff be put forward to handle customer telephone calls, that tradesmen should no longer be measured on their productivity but instead on the effectiveness of their repairs, and that all target times for repairs be removed – which, ironically, has made repairs faster.

Customers are delighted, Council house tenant Mrs Ward said: "The pilot scheme has been a huge success as far as I'm concerned. Whenever we've had a problem it has been rectified much quicker than it would've been done before. If the council can roll the scheme out across the city they will have lots of happy customers."

The staff response has been very positive too, Estate officer Julie King said "The new pilot scheme has made a huge impact. Tenants are reporting back that work is being carried out on time whereas previously appointments have been missed and follow on jobs not reported. It has made Estate Officer's lives easier as we can telephone any repairs straight through. Work that I have reported numerous times is now filtering through and being done."

So it seems that the method used in Lincoln works even though it required a serious rethink of what's considered good practice in the public sector, but the prospect of doing things differently wasn't going to hold back the council, in-fact it's a matter that John Bibby feels strongly about, "Most people would say what we've done is just common sense, I'd say it's actually un-common sense; but following the crowd has never been the way to innovation at the City of Lincoln Council and we're not about to start doing it now." Having proved their new approach is successful Lincoln will be rolling out the revamp to more of its council services very soon.