KEEPPING THE CUSTOMER SATISFIED

Customer Research on the Housing Repairs Service in West Lothian District Council

Prepared by Peter Gibson Associates

AUGUST 1993

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CHAIRMAN'S PREFACE

KEEPING THE CUSTOMER SATISFIED

For many years the Scottish Consumer Council has been urging service providers to ask consumers for their views on the services they provide, and it is encouraging that increasing numbers of public bodies are doing this. In particular, consumers of local authority services have a direct and immediate interest in the range and quality of the services that are paid for out of taxes. This interest is given added emphasis by the fact that consumers do not have any choice of most local authority services. If they do not like what they get, they cannot take their custom elsewhere.

This fundamental point underlines the need to tailor standards of performance of local authority services to fit consumers' needs, within the limits set by available resources. However, consumers' needs are not usually self-evident and it would be a mistake to take them for granted. Systematic methods have to be devised for finding out what consumers say they need and what their views are on standards of performance.

The resources needed to develop such methods can be looked on as an investment which brings returns both to local government and to consumers. Local authorities benefit from increased effectiveness of their services and the contribution this makes to efficiency in putting scarce resources to the best possible use. Consumers benefit from getting the range and standards of performance of services that they need.

For these reasons we were an enthusiastic partner with West Lothian District Council in
assessing tenants’ views of the housing repair service, with the intention of developing a Customer Code for Housing Repairs. The results of the research, along with detailed and general recommendations, are set out in this report.

The impact on West Lothian District Council of this independent study has been far-reaching. Currently, an extensive series of presentations on the findings of the report are being carried out. Staff at each of the six area offices have set up working groups to address the findings and to identify ways of improving the services - both locally and as a whole. They have accepted that the handling of complaints did not meet with the standards required by consumers of the service and have already come forward with proposals on how to organise their work better.

Working with West Lothian District Council has been a rewarding experience for the Scottish Consumer Council and we have particularly appreciated their enthusiastic and open approach. As a result we have a research report which will, I hope, be of interest not only within the borders of West Lothian District Council but to local authorities and consumers throughout Scotland.

Deirdre Hutton
CHAIRMAN
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Scottish Consumer Council is grateful to Peter Gibson, of Peter Gibson Associates, who researched and wrote this report and to MVA Consultancy who undertook the market research.

Thanks are also due to West Lothian District Council, in particular its Chief Executive, Alex Linkston; Convener James McGinley, Chairman of the Housing Committee; and Director of Housing, John Spraggan and his staff in Housing Services. We also acknowledge the help of the tenants of West Lothian District Council who gave up a considerable amount of their time to take part in discussions and indepth interviews. Without the District Council's commitment to an independent analysis of its housing repair service this report would never have been written.

The report was overseen by the SCC's Public Services and Utilities Committee. The members of the Committee are Winnie Sherry (Chairman), Peter Edmondson, Yvonne Osman, Mark Steiner and Deirdre Hutton (ex-officio).

The text was typed and prepared for publication by Lilian Matheson and Jackie Stalker and was edited by Katie Carr.
1.0 Introduction

1.1 This report is the final stage of a project which started in July 1992, when West Lothian District Council (WLDC) commissioned the Scottish Consumer Council, in association with Peter Gibson Associates, to undertake research into tenants' experience of the housing repairs service. It was carried out at a time when the Accounts Commission, as part of the Citizens Charter initiative, was developing performance indicators for various local authority services, including housing. The findings will therefore be of interest to a wider audience.

1.2 Peter Gibson, of Peter Gibson Associates, was project manager. He carried out initial interviews to explore the main housing repair issues with the Chair of the Housing Committee, the Director and Depute Director of Housing, several housing staff at an area office, a tradesman, and two tenant activists. On the basis of that information he drew up a research brief which was issued to four market research companies.

1.3 The MVA Consultancy was commissioned in September 1992 to undertake market research. The first stage of the market research involved qualitative research, which consisted of eight discussions among groups of tenants and a number of in-depth interviews. The discussions were held in four different parts of the district. Half the groups were with people over the age of 40, and half with people under 40. The groups were also split on the basis of whether they lived alone or as part of a couple. Most members of the groups had some repair work done in the past year. An average of eight people attended each session, which lasted up to one and a half hours.

1.4 The in-depth interviews were undertaken with six tenant activists, in different parts of West Lothian, and with ten councillors, who included those with experience of the Housing Committee and covered a range of political parties. The groups and the interviews were undertaken in October.

1.5 The findings from the qualitative stage were used to prepare the questionnaire and the sample for the second quantitative stage of research.

1.6 A total of 1,380 addresses were drawn from the Council's files of work undertaken in tenants' homes between April and October 1992. The sample was split evenly across the six area offices, and it also included work in four main categories - emergency, routine repair, upgrading and other work. All tenants were sent an explanatory letter from West Lothian District Council. One thousand, one hundred and seven face-to-face interviews were successfully completed between 4 December 1992 and 7 January 1993.

1.7 The proposal document set out the purpose of this document as follows:

"A final report which makes specific recommendations on the customer service standards for the housing repair service, to be used in a customer code or CCT specification, and makes general recommendations on the
methodology to be adopted in identifying customer priorities in other services”.

1.8 The next section covers the main strengths and weaknesses of the repairs service, in the opinion of council tenants in West Lothian. The main findings are also presented in the Appendix.

1.9 The report then sets out the issues to be addressed in a customer code for the repairs service, and finally makes more general recommendations to West Lothian District Council.

1.10 West Lothian District Council is to be commended for undertaking a major study into the views and experiences of its tenants in collaboration with an external agency, the Scottish Consumer Council. The researchers are grateful for the support and co-operation of both staff and elected representatives at West Lothian District Council.
2.0 Main Research Findings: General Points

2.1 West Lothian District Council tenants are generally satisfied with the housing repairs service that they receive. However, satisfaction with the service, at 71%, is at the lower end of the "reasonable" range: 23% are dissatisfied, which is too high. Dissatisfaction with the emergency service is twice as high amongst those who have used it recently compared with tenants in general (14% compared with 7%), and emergencies may attract more complaints than other types of repair.

2.2 It is generally easy to make contact with the housing department. When they do, tenants find that staff are friendly, polite, helpful and understand their repair problems, and on the whole are quick to respond and interested in tenants' problems. However, a significant minority of staff is seen as being uninterested in tenants' problems and slow to respond.

2.3 Inspectors usually come quickly after a repair is reported, at a convenient time. Post inspections are seen as particularly worthwhile, and there is support for more to be carried out. Tenants are also willing to provide written feedback. On the other hand, the great majority of tenants say they would like more exact appointment times than they are given at present. A significant number report not receiving a card or a follow-up letter when tradesmen have been unable to obtain access. Very few tenants are aware of the Council's cyclic repair system.

2.4 The majority of tenants have repair work started within a week or two of reporting the problem. Those who get a speedy routine repair are very satisfied, as are most people who need an emergency repair.

2.5 Tenants are given accurate indications of how long upgrading work will last, and are very satisfied with the results. Many tenants are willing to pay towards the cost of upgrading their houses. Nevertheless, on upgrading, one in five tenants are unhappy with their new windows or doors. In general, one in three of tenants are dissatisfied with repairs involving doors and windows.

2.6 The Council's tradesmen are seen generally as well qualified, much preferable to subcontractors, and they work quickly. Yet, tenants on the whole do not think that the Council uses the best quality materials, and the majority say that tradesmen only want to get the work done as quickly as possible. Many tenants agree that supervision is poor.

2.7 Most tenants know how to make a complaint, and many have done so over the past 12 months.

2.8 One in four (27%) customers who report a repair say that they make a complaint, compared to the one in twenty recorded by staff as complaining. This suggests that many jobs were not done "right first time", at least to the customers' satisfaction. There is also a problem in satisfying those who have complained: 62% remain dissatisfied, compared with only 30% who are satisfied with the way their complaint
has been dealt with. Nearly half (46%) of those complaining say that it took more than two months for their problem to be resolved.

2.9 Unreported complaints are up to 20% in some area offices, nearly four times the number in another area where tenants appear to find it easy to complain and get a speedy response. The main reason for not reporting complaints is the belief that the Council would not do anything about it/does not want to hear.

2.10 On the whole, tenants believe the service gives good value for money.
3.0 Issues to be Addressed in Customer Code for Housing Repairs

3.1 Introduction

3.1.1 This section moves the research findings towards the policy development stage, and identifies priorities for action which should achieve greater tenant satisfaction.

3.1.2 The points here are based on the MVA research and on discussions with the Director and Depute Director of Housing Services at West Lothian District Council and with the Scottish Consumer Council's Public Utilities Committee.

3.2 Overall customer satisfaction

3.2.1 At present, 71% of tenants are satisfied overall with WLDC's housing repair service. This result is reasonable, but there is considerable scope for improvement. In particular, 23% of tenants are dissatisfied overall with the service, which is too high. One person in ten is very dissatisfied with the service:

3.2.2 Recommendation 1

The aim should be to increase overall satisfaction to over 80% and reduce overall dissatisfaction to under 10% within three years. This should be achievable if the proposals which follow are implemented with the support of elected representatives and staff and the active co-operation of tenants.

3.2.3 The achievement of customer satisfaction should be made an explicit responsibility of all those working the housing service. Staff should share "ownership" of the setting and achieving of targets on customer performance. Performance should be monitored and success recognised.

3.2.4 Customer satisfaction will increase when the services are bought closer into line with customer expectations. This is the main thrust of the recommendations.

3.2.5 It may also be increased, however, by bringing customer expectations into line with the services provided. In other words, there is a need to improve communications with tenants, so that they are aware of the services available and of how to use them, such as the speed of response possible under a cyclic repair system.

3.2.6 West Lothian tenants showed willingness to help improve the housing repair services firstly by agreeing to take part in group discussions and to be interviewed, and secondly, in their responses to the survey by expressing positive interest in providing customer feedback on work carried out.

3.2.7 The first priority for improving customer satisfaction is to tackle one of the main causes of dissatisfaction, how complaints are handled at present.
3.3 Complaints handling

3.3.1 It is the aim of WLDC’s Housing Services to "get it right first time, every time". It is clear from the tenants' survey that the great majority of repairs, around five out of every six, are done "right first time", and it is the view of managers and elected representatives alike, that there has been a marked improvement in recent years.

3.3.2 However, even the most efficient service organisation is bound to fall short of the goal of getting it "right first time, every time". This is particularly so in a service like housing repairs where the range of problems is varied, a number of trades may need to be involved, and finding a solution to a problem, such as dampness, may not be easy straight away.

3.3.3 If organisations fail to get something right first time, they must make doubly sure that they get it right a second time. They must also have systems which identify where problems keep recurring. There is a substantial body of evidence across all services and from a number of countries, mainly from the work of TARP*, that organisations which put effort into encouraging customers to contact them about problems and resolve these problems fast, and which also have a system of "root cause analysis" to identify and correct recurring problems, generate high levels of customer satisfaction and loyalty. They also generate significant positive word-of-mouth comments by customers who are pleased at how their complaints have been taken seriously, their anger defused by a prompt apology, and the problems speedily resolved.

3.3.4 The wider evidence also shows that if there are a significant number of unreported problems or if complaints are not identified and resolved to the customers’ satisfaction, then dissatisfaction with the service soars. Negative word-of-mouth is generated which is disproportionately greater than any positive word-of-mouth generated by a good response to a complaint (bad news travels faster than good news).

3.3.5 The MVA research suggests that the housing repairs service does not deal well enough with tenants who complain about their repairs, and that this may be the most important single reason for the relatively high level of dissatisfaction with the service.

Tenants who experience problems with the repairs service

3.3.6 The MVA interviewers gave an explanation of what was meant by a complaint, namely reporting a problem with some aspect of the service and not an initial request that repair work be carried out. No fewer than 27% of those questioned said that they had made a complaint over the last 12 months. In addition to those making a complaint, a further 13% reported a problem with their repair which they

*TARP Inc of the USA, and TARP Europe are the leading specialists in customer contact and complaint handling.
did not report to the Council. It should be noted that a number of those who complained about one problem failed to make a complaint on another occasion. In total 36% of the total sample had at least one problem.

3.3.7 Moreover, a number of respondents had received more than one type of repairs service over the last year (upgrading, maintenance, emergency and routine), and a number had received more than one repair within each type, particularly routine. (We do not know the precise percentage of jobs which gave rise to problems.)

Unreported complaints

3.3.8 For unreported problems, there were significant variations between area offices, with one in five saying they had unreported problems, compared with only one in twenty in another area. In this last area it is interesting that only a very small number agreed with the statement "I feel it is a tremendous effort to make a complaint".

3.3.9 The largest reason given for not reporting problems was the attitude of the Council. Thirty one percent said that "the Council would not do anything about it", 4% that "the Council did not want to hear" and 6% said that they "did not want to appear to be a trouble maker". These responses should be of concern to the Council.

3.3.10 The second largest reason given was that they, the customers, "never got round to it" (27%). This may be of less concern to the Council, since there may be a number of relatively minor problems where the effort may seem disproportionate to the problem, but by making it easier to complain the Council would help bring more problems to their attention. Interestingly only 1% of this group gave "did not know where to complain to" as the reason for not reporting a complaint, although only 73% of the whole sample said that they knew who to complain to. Seven per cent of non-complainers said that they resolved the problem themselves.

3.3.11 The importance of ensuring that those who have problems do report them to the service provider is illustrated by looking at the overall satisfaction levels amongst those 146 individual tenants with unreported problems, compared with those who did not have a problem. Of those who had an unreported problem, 65% were satisfied with the repairs service overall, and 30% were dissatisfied (giving a net score of +35%) compared with 82% of those with no problems who were satisfied and 21% dissatisfied (giving a net score of +61%). Most of the differences are in the "very satisfied/very dissatisfied" categories, so that people with unreported problems are five times as likely to be "very dissatisfied" as the rest.

3.3.12 These findings are generally in line with research carried out by TARP, and suggest that reducing the number of unreported problems is an important step towards increasing overall levels of customer satisfaction.
3.3.13 **Recommendation 2**

The housing service should give tenants every encouragement to bring any problems with repairs service to the Council's attention. Every opportunity should be taken to ask tenants to get back in touch at once if there is a problem: office staff should convey this message face-to-face and over the telephone, tradesmen should repeat it, it should be carried in all the Council’s written communications, such as the newsletter and correspondence, and there should be signs displayed in every area office. A specially publicised and easy to remember telephone line, and a named person to contact could also encourage contact.

3.3.14 The main message should be that the Council wants to hear about problems to be able to put them right straight away.

**Reported complaints**

3.3.15 Two hundred and ninety four tenants, or 27% of the whole sample, reported making a complaint in the last 12 months.

3.3.16 Those making complaints were spread evenly across the district. The main differences in levels of complaint were by age, with those under 45 years making significantly more complaints (30% and more) than those over 55 years (20%).

3.3.17 Complaints seem particularly to be associated with those who used the emergency repairs service (although a question was not asked specifically about the type of service). However, the specific matters complained about do not on the whole seem to relate to the most critical parts of the emergency service (such as stopping water pour through a flat). Managers confirm that many complaints relate to delay in finishing the less urgent parts of the emergency repair, such as replacing bath panels.

3.3.18 About one third of complaints relate to doors and windows, which is disproportionately high. (This is discussed below under 3.5, Upgrading).

3.3.19 Whilst it is important, as discussed above, to encourage tenants to make complaints, and while it is encouraging that so many in West Lothian already do, it is essential that the housing service then provides a satisfactory and speedy resolution to the problems. This is not happening, in the main, at present.

3.3.20 Strikingly, only 30% of complainers are satisfied with the way their complaint was dealt with, compared with 62% who were dissatisfied (a net score of -32%). Moreover, within the latter group 43% were "very dissatisfied".

3.3.21 This level of dissatisfaction is not surprising given that 46% of complainers had to wait longer than two months for their problem to be resolved. Only 16% had their problem solved within a week, although as many as 41% expected their problem to be resolved within a week.
3.3.22 From this survey, and from other research, speed appears to be a key element in achieving satisfaction both with the way a complaint has been handled and with the service as a whole. Amongst those who had their complaint resolved within a week, 77% were satisfied with the repairs service overall and 21% were dissatisfied (a net score of +56%). Though the sample is very small (which is doubly unfortunate), this response is more positive than the overall levels of satisfaction in the whole sample. It is in line with TARP's findings that people whose complaints are resolved swiftly can be turned into very satisfied customers.

3.3.23 By contrast, of those who waited more than two months, only 37% were satisfied with the repairs service overall, and 55% were dissatisfied (a net score of -18%).

3.3.24 Of the sample of 1,107 tenants, only 38% of tenants agreed that the Council responds quickly once a complaint is made, compared to 44% who disagree. This suggests that word-of-mouth comments by those who have complained and experienced delays have reached many other tenants.

3.3.25 At present the housing service is not using complaints to create satisfied customers. Indeed, of those who complained only 47% expressed overall satisfaction with the repairs service, compared with 45% expressing overall dissatisfaction. This contrasts with non-complainers overall satisfaction level of 81% and dissatisfaction of 15%. Again, the differences are particularly marked in the very "satisfied/dissatisfied" categories. Complainers are four times as likely to be "very dissatisfied" as the others, and only a quarter as likely to be "very satisfied".

3.3.26 Put another way, of the 95 people in the whole sample of 1,107 saying that they are very dissatisfied with the repairs service, 61 are people who have complained and were dissatisfied.

3.3.27 Turning complainers into satisfied customers is one of the key tasks.

Turning complainers into satisfied customers

3.3.28 There are several straightforward steps that can be taken. First, according to management, records of complaints at area offices show a much lower incidence than tenants' accounts of the complaints that they make. Complaints should be defined as including every customer contact about a repair not being done "right first time". Staff should be trained to screen all customer contacts and to identify those which should be treated as complaints. These should be logged separately, and progress should be monitored closely. They should also be put into standard classifications to allow for management to carry out "root cause" analysis, to help identify and tackle recurring problems. Logging, classifying and analysing complaints can be most easily undertaken through modern technology.

3.3.29 Secondly, at present if a problem with a repair is reported, it generally re-enters the system as a new repair, and so it may take several weeks to complete, as in the normal course of events. It is essential that in future repair problems should be
"fast tracked" and treated as emergencies or within the new "urgent" category which aims at completion within five days.

3.3.30 Thirdly, it is not present practice to offer apologies as a matter of course to those who complain. There may also be some background concern about the implications of admitting liability. However, an apology offered immediately serves to defuse anger and is an indication that a complaint is being taken seriously (17% of tenants express the view that staff are not interested in their problems). Moreover, an apology need not be an admission of liability and training can be provided to employees on how to do this.

3.3.31 Those receiving complaints on the telephone or in person should thank the complainer for contacting the office, apologise for any inconvenience, explain what investigation must be carried out, if appropriate, give an indication of the timescale of response, give their own name, and welcome further contact. A copy of the complaint should be given or sent to the tenant, setting out the timescale of response and details of how to make contact to check on progress.

3.3.32 Where the inconvenience has been serious, a more senior official should make personal contact to offer an apology or explanation, or a letter should be sent, as 83% of tenants believe should happen.

3.3.33 Tradesmen too should play their part in apologising for the inconvenience in the job having to be tackled a second time or completed after a delay.

3.3.34 Recommendation 3

All problems with repairs should be logged as complaints, classified, and be put on a "fast track" as emergency/urgent repairs to be resolved within a week.

3.3.35 Recommendation 4

Tenants should be offered immediate spoken apologies when they complain, should be thanked for bringing the problem to the Council’s attention, should be told how and when it is likely to be resolved and should be given a written note of the complaint, including details which enable the tenant to check on progress. Where the problem has caused inconvenience, tenants should also be given a written apology or explanation.

3.3.36 Recommendation 5

Each area office should have a customer relations manager, whose name, photograph and telephone number are well publicised, to encourage tenants to bring repair and other problems to their attention.
3.3.37 Recommendation 6

The customer relations manager should be responsible for training staff on all aspects of customer contact, including screening all contacts to identify those which relate to a problem with the housing repair service and then logging and classifying all complaints and issuing tenants with a written note.

3.3.38 Recommendation 7

The customer relations manager should be responsible for progress chasing complaints through liaison with the contractors, for making personal contact with complainers or sending out written letters of apology or explanation within five days, and for carrying out analysis of recurring problems and bringing proposals for action to senior management.

3.3.39 Recommendation 8

Satisfaction amongst complainers about how their problem has been handled should be tracked, to measure progress against the results of the survey and to assess the performance of individual area offices. This should be carried out centrally.

3.3.40 These steps should achieve significant changes in satisfaction with how complaints are handled, and should allow progress to be measured. They should also improve overall satisfaction with the repairs service.

3.4 Emergency repairs

3.4.1 Amongst those using the emergency repairs service, there was a high level of satisfaction with it, namely 82%. Dissatisfaction amongst this group was only 14%. However, this was somewhat higher than amongst the total sample (7%), and there was a tendency for people having an emergency repair to be more likely to make a complaint.

3.4.2 The main problem with this service appears to be one of delay, with 11% saying that they waited more than 48 hours. However, this is not a straightforward finding. There is no clear definition of what the Council considers to be an emergency and there was, at the time of the survey, no "urgent" category, whereby certain work would be done within a few days. Staff and customers would therefore have the choice of work being defined as "routine" in which case it might take several weeks, or "emergency" in which case it would be done sooner. The findings here, therefore, probably do not all relate to genuine emergencies.

3.4.3 Indeed, managers believe that genuine emergencies are attended to within an hour of two, and the "median" time reported in the survey is two hours. This was also what customers in the earlier discussion groups indicated. An analysis of the type of "emergency" repair which takes longer than two days suggests that the work has been wrongly categorised. However, managers indicate that there may be a
problem in completing the non-emergency component of an emergency repair, such as finishings.

3.4.4 The survey showed that customers' priorities in defining what is an emergency are broadly consistent with the Council's own priorities. An interesting point which emerged in the customer group discussions and discussions with staff is that what constitutes an emergency may depend on the people in the household (frail elderly, infants) as well as the precise problem.

3.4.5 One way of formalising different standards for different types of customer is to produce a "special needs category", along the lines operated by British Gas, where customers register for a specially speedy and attentive service. This involves setting up costs and regular updating. If it were to be done as part of constructing a comprehensive database about both council properties and the people in them, the additional costs would not be great.

3.4.6 It may be sufficient simply to give staff guidance to elicit the necessary information from the tenant and classify the repair as a two-hour or 24-hour one accordingly. It is, nevertheless, important to introduce a further category of "urgent" repair, to help simplify what constitutes an emergency and reduce the number of emergency repairs. It would also be helpful to produce written information for tenants on what constitutes an emergency to give better guidance. Staff should at the time of reporting explain how they are classifying it and give a timetable for response.

3.4.7 Recommendation 9

There should be four separate categories of repair which are initiated by the tenant:

(a) Emergency Repair: two-hour response for the most pressing emergency.

(b) Emergency Repair: 24-hour response for the less pressing emergency.

(c) Urgent Repair: five-day response, to remove inappropriate cases from the emergency and routine repair categories.

(d) Routine Repair: response within the cyclic repair programme.

3.4.8 Recommendation 10

The housing service should provide all tenants with clear written information, indicating the types of repair likely to fall into each of these four categories. This should be on one side of a sheet of paper only, and should be issued with the tenants' handbook and other written communications to tenants.
3.4.9 Recommendation 11

When tenants are reporting a specific repair, such as an emergency, staff should elicit as much information as possible about the problem and about the people in the household before categorising the repair. The tenants should then be told what category the repair has been put into and the timetable for response.

3.4.10 Recommendation 12

Performance against these targets should be monitored and published.

3.5 Upgrading

3.5.1 Tenants who had recently had upgrading work on their property were generally very contented. They were satisfied with the actual work, with no fewer than 49% being very satisfied and 33% fairly satisfied, compared with 13% dissatisfied. They were also more satisfied with the repairs service as a whole than other tenants.

3.5.2 From a management point of view, houses which have been upgraded need fewer routine and other repairs than the rest of the stock. So investment in the stock reduces demands on the repairs service and boosts satisfaction.

3.5.3 As far as possible, then, the Council should be investing in upgrading work, and the survey suggests that around two thirds of tenants may be willing to pay more to have work done to their home. This proportion varies according to the type of upgrading, and a significant number of those expressing interest said that it would depend on the amount of money. The potential benefits are great for both landlord and tenant. The customer discussion groups mentioned this approach.

3.5.4 Recommendation 13

West Lothian District Council may wish to consider accelerating the upgrading of the housing stock by using the willingness of many tenants to pay more for the improvement of their own home.

3.5.5 There are only two problem areas. The first is that dissatisfaction with upgrading seems to concentrate on doors and windows. Indeed, it is notable that new doors and windows appear as the tenants' main desire for upgrading work, but after that work is done many remain dissatisfied. This appears to be the experience of other public landlords. It is suggested that much of the problem with windows lies not so much with the windows themselves but with related work.

3.5.6 Since old windows are not standard size, but new windows are, frequently larger holes have to be made in the walls, and there may be delays in completing this related work to make the walls wind and water tight. This is an area where the views of tenants should be sought, to identify the roots of these problems. This
could be done in two ways, by asking individual tenants and by bringing together groups of tenants after the work is completed.

3.5.7 Recommendation 14

As part of post contract assessment, the housing service’s inspectors should formally consult individual tenants for their views on the contract and any problems which arose, in addition to consulting contractors and architects.

3.5.8 The number of tenants in each contact area is not large, and on many aspects of the work the tenant is the expert. Where possible groups of tenants in an area where upgrading work has been done should be brought together and asked about how similar projects should be conducted in future, from the tenants' point of view. It may be that problems relate to the way that particular contractors organise their work, which could mean that tighter specification and more regular site inspections would increase overall tenant satisfaction.

3.5.9 The second problem area, which is not so significant, is the number of tenants who claim not to have received written notification from the Council. This is probably a problem of recall rather than delivery, since formal letters are dispatched centrally and the same list is used to notify the contractor about the relevant properties.

3.5.10 One possible solution is to make the letter containing the news that work is to be carried out recognisably different from other letters from the landlord.

3.6 Routine repairs

3.6.1 Tenants were generally satisfied with the routine repairs that they had carried out in their house, with 72% satisfied and 22% dissatisfied amongst a sample of 861. They had an average of 1.8 routine repairs done in the last 12 months, or over 1,500 jobs. Their overall levels of satisfaction with this aspect of the service were almost identical to the whole sample’s attitude to the repairs service, 71% satisfied against 23% dissatisfied, but within these figures many more were very satisfied with routine repairs, 45%, than with the whole service, 17%.

3.6.2 Routine repairs will be looked at in terms of speed of response, organisation of appointments, information for tenants and quality of work.

Speed of response

3.6.3 The survey indicates that the driving factor in satisfaction with routine repairs is speed. So strong is the relationship, that it raises questions about tenants’ genuine willingness to wait for longer periods of time under a cyclic repair system, which is discussed below. It is possible that if urgent repairs were to be removed from the routine category, the relationship of speed to satisfaction would be moderated.

3.6.4 However, the relationship at present is very strong (see "Satisfaction with Routine Repair by Length of Wait" in the Appendix). Of the 30 whose routine repair was
started the same day, 100% were satisfied with the repair. Of the 40 whose repair was started the next day 88% were satisfied. By seven days, satisfaction was down to 80% and dissatisfaction up to 18%. By two to three weeks, satisfaction was reduced to 71% and dissatisfaction 24%, and thereafter dissatisfaction rose sharply. Amongst those whose repair was still not complete at the time of the survey, the majority were dissatisfied.

3.6.5 "Length of Wait between Reporting, Repair and Repair being Started" (Appendix), shows that most routine repairs at present start between one and two weeks, but 13% have still not been started within five weeks.

3.6.6 On the basis of these figures, it would appear that to achieve satisfaction levels of 80% + routine repairs have to be started within a week. This is not feasible in the foreseeable future, but action should be taken to reduce delays.

3.6.7 The first step, already mentioned, is to create a new urgent category, which will fast track certain repairs at present taking longer.

3.6.8 The second step would be to reduce the number of jobs requiring pre-inspection. Where no pre-inspection is carried out, 50% of repairs are started within a week, but when an inspector calls, only 31% of repairs start within a week.

3.6.9 At present some 19% of repairs are taking two weeks or more for an inspector to visit (including 28% in one area), and only 52% of inspections are completed within a week. This suggests that pre-inspections are a major factor in preventing routine repairs from being done as fast as tenants want.

3.6.10 If private contractors were to be employed, there would be a clear need to retain a high level of pre-inspections as a form of cost control. Where the work has not been clearly specified, or where there is a question about significant expenditure, such as replacing rather than repairing, then pre-inspections may also be necessary.

3.6.11 However, experience from elsewhere suggests that investment in computerised housing stock database can reduce the need for pre-inspection, even where there is a question about whether repairing or replacing is appropriate. The database has details about each part of the house, including the age, materials used, previous work done on components, and where the house features in the planned maintenance and upgrading programmes. With this information on screen, the member of staff can elicit more information from the tenant to pinpoint the repair problem, and make a decision about whether to repair or replace. This approach reduces the need for most pre-inspections, and also reduces the need for more than one visit by tradesmen. It does require considerable initial investment.

3.6.12 To ensure that the routine repairs service operates speedily, all inspections should be carried out within three days. Cases should be prioritised and overall inspection numbers reduced to permit this to happen.
3.6.13 Recommendation 15

All pre-inspections should be carried out within three days of the repair being reported.

3.6.14 Recommendation 16

As long as routine repairs are carried out by the Direct Labour Organisation (DLO), pre-inspections should be reduced to below the present level.

3.6.15 The overall speed of repair to be aimed at will depend on the type of appointment/cyclic system operated. However, within three years the aim should be to complete 90% of repairs within three weeks. Where this is not possible, because of supply problems, tenants should be given specific advice.

3.6.16 Recommendation 17

Within three years, the aim should be to complete 90% of routine repairs within three weeks.

Appointments systems, cyclic repairs and tenant information

3.6.17 At present tenants are given little information about when routine repairs will be carried out, and few have heard of the cyclic repairs system, even where an "all trades cycle" has operated for the past year.

3.6.18 The cyclic system, which is now four-weekly, has been a success as far as managers are concerned, and it makes possible the offering of more exact appointments ("Tuesday 16 March pm or Wednesday 17 March am?"). However, it has not been actively marketed.

3.6.19 Such a change is likely to increase satisfaction levels. Tenants who were offered no appointment at all, or were told that it would be AM or PM but with no dates mentioned, expressed the least satisfaction. It should be noted that many elderly tenants, amongst others, did not place high priority on more exact appointments. This will give staff valuable flexibility, in offering those people who want it "first call of the day" or "sometime in the afternoon of the sixteenth", but giving others who do not want a specific appointment a broader indication, "Monday or Tuesday next week".

3.6.20 Recommendation 18

Tenants who want a more exact appointment, such as a morning or afternoon, on a specific date, should be offered it.
3.6.21 Recommendation 19

The all trades cycle, which offers this facility, should be extended to the whole district and should be actively marketed, giving tenants information about how it can work to their benefit.

3.6.22 The group discussions and the survey results suggested that a number of tenants are not convinced that their repair details are noted correctly. In the groups, some tenants reported repairs in person so that they could see the person writing down what they said. It was good practice for staff to read back to tenants details of the reported repair, on the telephone and over the counter, to ensure that the details are correct and reassure tenants. Staff should also offer tenants a written copy of the receipt.

3.6.23 Recommendation 20

Area office staff should read back details of a reported repair and offer tenants a copy.

3.6.24 A further problem is reported by tenants that repair cards are frequently not left by tradesmen who call when they are out, and that they do not receive follow up letters from the area office. Both of these weaknesses, if true, are likely to reduce the speed and efficiency of the service. Access problems should be reduced by more exact appointments being offered. Nevertheless, tradesmen should have pre-printed cards to deliver, and foremen should monitor usage of cards when no access has been given.

3.6.25 Because of the need for speed, the area office staff should telephone tenants who were not in at the appointed time to arrange a further appointment and to check that a "no access" card was left. Letters should only be sent where telephone contact is not possible.

3.6.26 To facilitate telephone contact, the housing service should gather information about tenants' home telephone numbers, where they have a domestic telephone, and, where appropriate, work telephone numbers.

3.6.27 Where the Council has failed to keep an appointment, the repair should be fast tracked. Where the tenant has failed to keep an appointment, the Council may still wish to give the repair priority to achieve customer satisfaction.

3.6.28 Where tenants do not have a telephone, the Council might consider pilot testing the use of pre-paid repair reporting cards, to ease the problem of reporting repairs in this group. Since there may be particular problems of access in the more rural parts of the district, a pilot exercise might be based on an office with a significant landward area.
3.6.29 **Recommendation 21**

The use of "no access" cards should be encouraged and monitored by the DLO and area office staff. The telephone should be used whenever possible to arrange new appointments, and information should be gathered to facilitate greater use of the telephone.

**Quality**

3.6.30 The main source of dissatisfaction with routine repairs concerned windows and doors. These are discussed under upgrading, above, and problems relating to them should be tackled as part of an overall quality approach.

3.6.31 Tenants believe that 26% of repairs were post inspected, though this figure almost certainly includes inspections by the foreman from the contractor side, as well as by the inspector from the client side.

3.6.32 Tenants are most likely to identify more post-inspections as the way to improve quality of work, but they are also willing to play their part as active consumers, in particular by being sent forms to record their satisfaction or dissatisfaction.

3.6.33 Post-inspections have recently been increased to around 20%, just as pre-inspections are being reduced. Ideally, post-inspections should not only look at the quality of the work carried out, but should look at how the work done relates to the job line, and if the tenant is present how it relates to the initial report given by the tenant. If done systematically, this would help identify any problems in the specification being given by the area office staff to the DLO.

3.6.34 Tenants, however, should be given a more active role to play. First of all, they should be encouraged to be their own "clerk of works" and asked to make contact fast with the area office if a problem occurs. They should be given clear information about who to contact: a name, job title, and telephone number will boost response rates. It is not surprising that of those who knew who to complain to in the whole sample, 32% had made a complaint in the last year, compared with only 12% who did not know who to contact. There may be particular problems with flat dwellers and newer tenants, who could be targeted with better and positive information. Flat dwellers tend to be younger, more mobile, and less knowledgeable than other tenants.

3.6.35 As well as inviting tenants to make contact with any problems, a sample of tenants should routinely be sent response cards to record their satisfaction with their recent repair. Spread across trades and area offices, this would enable performance to be monitored continuously, and changes over time or differences between areas would provide actionable management information.
3.6.36 Recommendation 22

Satisfaction amongst tenants with routine repairs should be tracked, to measure progress over time, to assess the performance of different parts of the service, and to measure satisfaction with key aspects of the service, such as speed and quality. The movements of performance indicators should be published regularly, both to tenants and more generally.

3.7 Information for tenants

3.7.1 Communication with tenants underlies a number of the problems identified in the survey, and many of the recommendations contain suggestions on how information for tenants could be improved. The majority of tenants already make relatively easy contact with the housing repairs service, but with better information they could make an even more valuable contribution to improving the service.

3.7.2 Indeed a positive desire for more information did emerge in the survey. For example, tenants who did not know who to contact were also significantly more likely to want a list of what constitutes an emergency repair. As noted above, there appears to be a particular information problem with flat dwellers, who also tend to be less happy with the overall service. This could be addressed by more regular sending of information to flat dwellers, and possibly also the permanent display in public areas of blocks of flats of information about how to report a repair, the four repair categories with examples, and how to make a complaint.

3.7.3 The policy on information provision should concentrate on:

(i) enabling and encouraging tenants to make appropriate contact at the appropriate time with a repair problem;

(ii) giving information to the tenant relevant to that repair problem, orally in the first instance and backed up by written information if the tenant desires;

(iii) using the telephone wherever possible to speed up incoming and outgoing communications;

(iv) involving staff at all levels to convey the same consistent messages;

(vi) repeating key information about the repairs service in the Council newspaper and in correspondence.

3.7.4 Tenants mentioned in the discussion groups that it would be valuable to have photographs of staff, with job titles, in the public part of the area housing office. People are more likely to make contact with a named individual, whose face they know, than with an anonymous organisation. This inexpensive approach would further encourage tenants to report repairs and make complaints.
3.7.5 When reporting repairs, tenants should be read back what has been recorded, whether they have made contact in person or by telephone. This should help confirm the accuracy of the report and reassure tenants that their details have indeed been noted. It may serve to reduce the demand for written confirmation of details, which was reported in the survey. Nevertheless, staff should offer written confirmation for those who wish it.

3.7.6 However, it is proposed that, for an initial period at least, copies of complaint details should be issued automatically, as a tangible indication that the Council takes complaints seriously. This would confirm the timescale of response, enable the tenants to assess performance and give them details about how to make contact if the complaint is not dealt with immediately. Once an effective system of complaint handling is in place and tenants are satisfied with the outcome, this may be reviewed. However, in the short term, the highest priority must be given to satisfying complainers.

3.7.7 Recommendation 23

The Council should prepare an information policy with explicit guidance to all staff, including contractors, who have contact with tenants.
4.0 General Recommendations to West Lothian District Council

4.1 Complaints

4.1.1 This survey highlights the value of focusing on the problems that people have with a service and on what happens when they bring that problem to the attention of the service provider. It is welcome that increasing numbers of public bodies are asking the public for their views on services. However, too many studies emerge which show apparently high levels of satisfaction amongst users and which give little indication about how the service might be improved. People who generally are satisfied with a service may have comparatively little to say about it. By contrast, those who have had problems are likely to have seen the service at its worst and at its best, and to have clear views about its strengths and weaknesses.

4.1.2 A detailed examination of the transactions, in this case housing repairs, which give rise to problems; the extent to which these problems are reported or unreported; the reasons for them being unreported; the outcomes when they are reported, in terms of speed of response and satisfaction amongst complainers with how their case has been handled and with the service overall: all these reveal in sharp detail many of the weaknesses in the present system and suggest how by addressing them customer satisfaction can be increased. Paying attention to problems can produce positive results.

4.1.3 It should be noted that a quantitative survey of the kind undertaken by MVA provides information about the extent to which there are problems with the service. Only this sort of survey can assess the extent of unreported problems. This enables systems to be put in place to cope with the level of demand generated once the organisation starts positively to invite complaints. To solicit complaints before assessing the extent of unreported problems runs the risk of generating demands which cannot be met.

4.1.4 However, once the extent of problems is assessed, remedial action can be taken. In this case, around one in six repairs lead to problems, and about two out of three of these are reported. This is good news, compared with the experience of other organisations or services where levels of unreported problems can be very high.

4.1.5 While large scale surveys will at times be necessary to provide a yardstick, these are costly. By comparison, the information provided by customers who have a problem is very cheap and is available the year round. It should be seen as a potentially valuable source of management information, and treated accordingly.

4.1.6 It is important that any complaints procedure introduced for individual services or the Council as a whole should encourage speedy, informal complaints by telephone or in person, to enable problems to be put right. The emphasis should not be on the formal or quasi judicial. The faster that problems are identified and rectified, the less likely it is that people will wish to complain formally. There is value in having an explicit procedure by which complaints escalate from, say, area office to Director/Depute Director, to Councillor, to Ombudsman.
4.1.7 Before launching a general West Lothian District Council complaints policy, it would be valuable to commission research which quantifies the extent to which people in West Lothian have problems with the Council's various services and the extent to which they act on these problems. This background information would help the Council prepare for the launch of such a policy. It might also identify areas where changes in service delivery should be made, or where further research on a specific service should be undertaken.

4.2 Customer Surveys

4.3 The methodology set out in Section 1 is fairly rigorous and if repeated in other services would be likely to produce solid results. It is, however, both expensive and time consuming to conduct a full scale market research exercise. Moreover, it is not always easy to see how a short cut can be taken without weakening the findings. The qualitative research, i.e. the first stage, generated valuable information for the questionnaire but many of the most interesting findings, such as on complaining behaviour and on the relationship between speed of repair and satisfaction, only emerged from the major second stage study. Moreover, some detail in the first stage was contradicted in the second, namely the two groups in one area were the most critical of the value for money offered by the repairs services, but the sample from the same area in the main survey was the most positive of all about value for money.

4.3.1 One possible way forward would be to commission a general survey on all Council services, but focusing on problems, which is suggested in 4.1 above. Another approach would be for West Lothian District Council to commission a major customer survey relatively infrequently, say every two or three years. If West Lothian were to become a unitary authority responsible for a full range of services, they may wish to carry out more regular research. It would be possible for each survey to focus on a particular service, but to monitor satisfaction levels with services in general.

4.4 Customer feedback

4.4.1 On a more regular basis, customer feedback can be obtained from users of particular services or from complainers by issuing prepaid self-completion response cards. The Council should consider establishing a new customer care unit. This would carry out central monitoring of a range of services, as well as being responsible for commissioning larger surveys, organising customer relations training, and monitoring complaint handling. This could be a very small unit, operating close to the Chief Executive, which would help managers of the Council's services increase customer satisfaction.
APPENDIX
TENANTS SATISFACTION WITH SERVICES

OVERALL SATISFACTION
-23%
71%

EMERGENCY SERVICE
-12%
83%

UPGRADE/MAINTENANCE
-13%
82%

ROUTINE REPAIR
-22%
72%

COMPLAINT HANDLING
-62%
30%

DISSATISFACTION
SATISFACTION
CONTACT WITH HOUSING REPAIRS SERVICE

- EASY CONTACT: 85% (14% negative)
- HELPFUL: 87% (5% negative)
- SPEED OF RESPONSE: 67% (25% negative)
- INTEREST IN PROBLEM: 68% (18% negative)
- FRIENDLINESS: 91% (3% negative)
- UNDERSTAND PROBLEM: 83% (9% negative)
SATISFACTION WITH DIFFERENT ASPECTS
OF THE
HOUSING REPAIR SERVICE

SPEED OF REPAIR: -25% satisfaction, 67% dissatisfaction
QUALITY OF WORKMANSHIP: -17% dissatisfaction, 74% satisfaction
COMMUNICATION BETWEEN COUNCIL AND TENANTS: -19% dissatisfaction, 70% satisfaction
STAFF AND TRADESMEN'S ATTITUDE TO WORK: -10% dissatisfaction, 77% satisfaction
APPOINTMENT SYSTEM: -22% dissatisfaction, 57% satisfaction
QUALITY CONTROL: -19% dissatisfaction, 61% satisfaction
EMERGENCY SERVICE: -7% dissatisfaction, 72% satisfaction
EASE OF CONTACT WITH HOUSING DEPARTMENT: -2% dissatisfaction, 93% satisfaction
REPAIR BEING COMPLETED ON FIRST VISIT: -15% dissatisfaction, 71% satisfaction
SPEED OF REPAIRS
LENGTH OF WAIT BETWEEN REPORTING REPAIR AND REPAIR BEING BEING STARTED

- SAME DAY: 13%
- 1 DAY: 18%
- 2-3 DAYS: 13%
- 4-5 DAYS: 13%
- 6-7 DAYS: 7%
- 1-2 WEEKS: 10%
- 2-3 WEEKS: 8%
- 3-4 WEEKS: 9%
- 4-5 WEEKS: 5%
- OTHER: 4%

Diagram showing the percentage distribution of wait times between reporting a repair and repair being started.
SPEED OF REPAIRS
REASONABLE LENGTH OF WAIT BETWEEN REPORTING REPAIR AND REPAIR BEING BEING STARTED
SATISFACTION WITH ROUTINE REPAIR
BY
LENGTH OF WAIT FOR REPAIR

% SATISFACTION

TIME

SAME DAY | 1 DAY | 2-3 DAYS | 4-5 DAYS | 6-7 DAYS | 1-2 WEEKS | 3-4 WEEKS | 4-5 WEEKS | REPAIR NOT COMPLETE

SATISFACTION

DISSATISFACTION
**APPOINTMENTS OFFERED**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>None at all</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AM or PM but no date</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AM or PM and a few dates</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AM or PM and day of week</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AM or PM and a date</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
QUALITY OF WORK

- Council only uses best quality materials: -50%, 31%
- Council tradesmen are well qualified: -23%, 57%
- I would rather get a subcontractor: -64%, 18%
- Council would rather repair than replace: -9%
- Tradesmen take pride in their work: -30%, 46%
- Tradesmen want to get the work done quickly: -26%, 61%
- Council tradesmen are poorly supervised: -27%, 49%
TENANTS WHO HAVE COMPLAINED IN THE LAST 12 MONTHS  27%

UNREPORTED COMPLAINTS  13%
TIME TAKEN TO RESOLVE A COMPLAINT

**UPTO 1 WEEK** 16 %

**1-2 WEEKS** 12 %

**2-3 WEEKS** 7 %

**3-4 WEEKS** 7 %

**1-2 MONTHS** 6 %

**MORE THAN 2 MONTHS** 46 %

**NO REPLY** 7 %
ATTITUDE TOWARDS COMPLAINTS

MAKE COMPLAINT IN PRIVATE

WHO I'M SPEAKING TO ON PHONE

COUNCIL Responds Very Quickly

WOULD GO TO COUNCILLOR IF UNSATISFIED

COUNCILLORS GET PROBLEMS RESOLVED QUICKER

GET An APOLOGY/EXPLANATION

TREMENDOUS EFFORT TO COMPLAIN

GO TO HEAD OFFICE IN BATHGATE IF UNHAPPY
MAIN REASONS FOR NOT REPORTING A PROBLEM

THE COUNCIL WOULD NOT DO ANYTHING ABOUT IT 31 %

NEVER GOT ROUND TO IT 27 %

DID IT OURSELVES 7 %

DID NOT WANT TO BE A TROUBLE MAKER 6 %

FED UP WITH IT ALL 6 %

THE COUNCIL DO NOT WANT TO HEAR 4 %

Sample Size 146