SCOTTISH CONSUMER COUNCIL

BUILDERS AFTER SALES SERVICE

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CHAIRMAN'S PREFACE

Buying a house is probably the most important and expensive purchase consumers ever make. Buyers of new houses normally have high expectations about their new home and this includes expecting a prompt and satisfactory response from their builder if faults develop once they have moved in.

In 1988 the Scottish Consumer Council published "Buying a House in Scotland". One fact highlighted in this report was that 41% of those who had bought new houses reported problems with after sales service. With this in mind, SCC decided to find out how builders approach the task of providing after sales service.

This report looks at the level of priority builders give to after sales service, the way they deal with problems and examines examples of best practice. Twenty-eight of the biggest building firms in Scotland answered a questionnaire about their after sales policies and follow-up interviews were carried out with nine firms.

Although most builders give after sales service a high priority, there is still room for improvement in this area, given that a high proportion of buyers experience problems.

We believe that improvements are needed in staff training, information for buyers, construction practice and handling complaints.

Our findings and recommendations will be of interest to builders throughout Scotland, irrespective of their size. I commend this report to you.

Deirdre Hutton

September 1991
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Scottish Consumer Council would like to thank the National House-Building Council (NHBC) for their help in preparing this report. We are particularly grateful to Mr Bob Blair (former Director, NHBC) for his help at the beginning of the project and Mr Eric Purves (Director, NHBC) for help once the report was completed.

Most importantly we would like to thank all the builders who took the time to fill in our questionnaire and those who were prepared to be interviewed. We also gratefully acknowledge the help of those builders who commented on a draft version of the report.

Typescripts: Muriel Adam and Rona Rae
BUILDERS AFTER SALES SERVICE

1. INTRODUCTION

In 1988 the Scottish Consumer Council published a report on the experiences of house buyers in Scotland. "Buying a House in Scotland" covered advice, information and the quality of service received by buyers. The report was based on the replies of a sample of 541 purchasers in central and northeast Scotland who had bought houses costing under £35,000 and were registered in April and May of 1987. Eighty of the purchasers had bought a brand new house from a builder/developer.

One interesting fact that emerged from this study was that 41% of those who had bought new houses reported problems with after sales service. Moreover, buyers of new houses were generally less satisfied with their builders (63% satisfied) than they were with their lender (89%), solicitor (84%) and surveyor (78%). This is reflected in the fact that only 29% of those who bought their houses from a builder said they would buy from the same builder again.

There was no evidence to suggest that this group of buyers was especially prone to be dissatisfied. Indeed, buyers of new houses were more likely (79%) than other purchasers (66%) to say that they would use the same lender in future. They appear to have had more direct personal contact with their lenders than other purchasers, suggesting that their problems were specific to their dealings with builders.

The most frequent complaints about after sales service were builders' inability (due to liquidation), slowness and failure to:

* correct faults
* make repairs and alterations
* complete work such as roadsurfacing

There was also reason to believe that the problems were not confined to a limited number of building firms. Purchasers had bought from a large range of builders from small local concerns to national companies. The SCC therefore decided to carry out further research to find out more about the after sales service of building firms, possibly with a view to recommending improvements in practice.
2. AIM

The aim of the research was to identify and promote good practice in builders' after sales service and to increase buyer satisfaction. We were pleased to receive the encouragement and help of the National House Builders Council (NHBC) in carrying out this research. It is in the interest of both buyers and builders that high standards of service and high levels of customer satisfaction should be achieved. This is because satisfied customers will buy from the same builders again and recommend them to other people.

3. APPROACH

The data gathering for this report was done in two ways.

The first approach was to send questionnaires to 32 of the biggest builders in Scotland. The companies who responded are listed in Table 1. Responses were received from 28 firms. Although 28 questionnaires appears at first sight to be a very small sample, these firms represented about 80% of the market.

The questionnaires covered questions on:

- the priority given to after sales service
- the staff responsible for after sales service
- staff training in dealing with customer complaints
- advice to buyers about after sales service
- policy on dealing with complaints

The questionnaire is reproduced as Appendix I.

The second stage was to follow up the questionnaires with personal interviews. Staff were interviewed at the companies listed in Table 2. The companies were selected to give a wide geographical spread and a range of large, medium and small sized firms. The interviews covered some new topics not mentioned in the questionnaire and also followed up interesting responses in more detail.
<table>
<thead>
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<th>Table 1. Builders who responded to the questionnaire</th>
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<td>Balfour Beatty Homes (Paisley)</td>
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<td>Barratt Scotland Ltd (Falkirk)</td>
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<td>Beazer Homes (Scotland) Ltd (Falkirk)</td>
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<td>Bellway Urban Renewals (Glasgow)</td>
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<td>Bett Brothers plc (Dundee)</td>
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<td>G.S. Brown Construction Ltd (Perth)</td>
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<td>London &amp; Clydeside Estates Ltd (Glasgow)</td>
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<td>Lovell Homes (Scotland) Ltd (Glasgow)</td>
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<td>Hugh MacRae &amp; Co. (Builders) Ltd (Inverness)</td>
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<td>McCarthy and Stone (Developments) Ltd (Glasgow)</td>
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<td>Robertson Residential (Elgin)</td>
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<td>Robison and Davidson Ltd (Dumfries)</td>
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<td>A &amp; J Stephen (Builders) Ltd (Perth)</td>
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<td>Tay Homes (Scotland) Ltd (Glasgow)</td>
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<td>Tilbury Homes (Scotland) Ltd (Paisley)</td>
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<td>Wimpey Homes Ltd (Edinburgh)</td>
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Table 2. Companies interviewed

Beazer Homes (Scotland) Ltd (Falkirk)
G.S. Brown Construction Ltd (Perth)
Cala Homes Ltd (Edinburgh)
Eagle Homes (Scotland) Ltd (Aberdeen)
Laing Homes Ltd (Glasgow)
Lovel Homes (Scotland) Ltd (Glasgow)
M & K MacLeod (Lochgilphead)
Muir Homes Ltd (Inverkeithing)
Wimpey Homes Ltd (Edinburgh)

4. THE NHBC BUILDMARK SCHEME

Buildmark is the warranty scheme for new homes administered by the NHBC. This warranty scheme protects house buyers by monitoring the way in which new houses are built and by providing insurance cover against defects. All the firms covered in this report are members of the NHBC Buildmark scheme.

The Buildmark scheme is clearly explained in the NHBC Buildmark booklet, which is automatically given to buyers of new houses. The booklet is divided into two sections which cover warranties and insurance in part A and a Home Owner's Guide in part B. The booklet which was edited and designed by the Plain English Campaign is easy to use and very informative.

When a house is being built the builder must construct it in line with NHBC requirements. These include the undertaking to build the house in

"an efficient and workmanlike manner and of proper materials and so as to be fit for habitation." (Buildmark 1990, Scottish Edition).

After the house has been completed the builder is under obligation to repair any defects that

"arise as a result of his not keeping to NHBC's standards for materials and workmanship."

This obligation lasts for the first two years after construction.

4
When a defect emerges the buyer must inform the builder in writing as soon as possible. The builder must then correct the defect within a reasonable time and at his own expense. Builders are not liable for certain defects, for example those due to normal wear and tear, deterioration due to neglect and normal shrinkage, dampness and condensation.

If the builder does not deal with a complaint satisfactorily the buyer must inform the NHBC in writing. The NHBC will then investigate the claim and make a written recommendation. If the buyer accepts the recommendation the NHBC will ensure it is implemented. If it is not accepted the dispute will be referred to independent arbiters.

From the third to tenth years after the house is completed the Buildmark Scheme insures the buyer against any major damage due to a defect in the:
* structure of the house
* drainage system
* external rendering
* external cladding

The NHBC will pay for the defects to be corrected or will undertake the work itself.

The Buildmark warranty transfers to the second or subsequent buyers provided that the ten year warranty period has not expired.

5. MUNICIPAL MUTUAL FOUNDATION 15 SCHEME

An alternative warranty scheme for new houses, Foundation 15, was introduced by Municipal Mutual Insurance in 1990. This scheme did not come into operation until after our research was underway. Very few builders in Scotland (and none of those covered in this report) have joined the scheme to date. The Foundation 15 scheme differs from Buildmark in that it gives a 15 year structural warranty. Otherwise its terms and conditions are similar to the Buildmark scheme.
6. FINDINGS

(1) Priority given by the Company to after sales service

Of the 28 companies that responded to the questionnaire 23 gave after sales service a high priority. The remaining five gave it a medium priority.

(2) Responsibility for after sales service

Most of the companies (26) have a specific department or employee who is responsible for after sales service. Only two companies, Morrison Homes and Brown Construction, do not have a separate after sales team. At Brown Construction buyers deal with one contact person all the way through the buying process and afterwards during the warranty period.

(3) Guidance for personnel on dealing with customers

Most firms (22) provide guidance for staff in dealing with after sales enquiries and customer complaints. Of these many give only verbal guidance. Although we asked for examples of any written guidance that is issued, only five sent us copies. We presume from this that very little, if any, written guidance is provided. Beazer Homes do not issue guidance because "with an established after-sales department, staffed by experienced personnel such written guidance is not considered necessary".

At Lovell, staff are urged to maintain the Lovell pledge which aims to ensure that customers are satisfied with their new homes. While we welcome this intention it is rather vague in terms of specific guidance for staff in dealing with customers. Cala on the other hand have a detailed list of instructions on how to deal with customers' enquiries and complaints. This includes noting down details of complaints made over the phone. It also advises what sorts of problem are the responsibility of the builder and how long after occupation they are obliged to deal with the particular problem. This sheet of guidance provides a good supplement to staff training schemes. Another firm also has a very good sheet of instructions on how to handle complaints (Fig. 1). This includes perceptive statements such as

"The complaint, skilfully handled, can turn an upset purchaser into a combination of unpaid salesman/PR agency for the company."

The instructions include advice on how to react to the buyer and what action to take.
Fig.1. Instructions to staff on how to handle complaints

Handling Complaints

The complaint, skilfully handled, can turn an upset purchaser into a combination of unpaid salesman/PR agency for the company.

That is why the correct handling of complaints is a skill so worth developing.

Remember when someone is moved to complain, they are usually upset. When people are upset they are illogical and inclined to exaggeration and extremes of behaviour.

Against that background, the skilful application of the following checklist can turn even the most disenchanted complainant into a friend for life:-

*Don't get involved and take the complaint personally.

*Tell the complainant that you are sorry he/she is upset and that you will try to do everything possible to help them and rectify any real problem.

*Ask them to explain, from the beginning, their complaint. As they talk take notes on a pad. (The sight of you actually taking notes - ie. they are taking me seriously - can be very therapeutic.)

*Don't interrupt. Listen until he/she has talked out. Don't argue, comment or disagree - just listen and take notes.

*When the story is finished, play it back to him/her. "As I understand it, Mr Smith, you have ..... Is that correct?"

*If you can deal with it on the spot, do so. If not, then set an interim action plan in train. Whatever you promise, make sure you/the company can deliver.

Failure to deliver will produce another complaint.

*Ask the complainant to put the complaint in writing to the company in order to protect their interests.
*FINALLY, when talking about the company during a complaint, never switch from "WE" to "THEY". You are the company and have to take the criticism as well as the plaudits.

Regardless of provocation, always show respect for the views of the buyer. Remember, respect is a reflective process - the more you give the more is received in return. We've all experienced the rude visitor - usually at the end of a foot-sore day - who maligns the product, but remember, others present will be impressed by your polite handling of the situation and will see it as an example of your professionalism.
(4) Training in customer care

Staff responsible for after sales service at Lovell, Wimpey, Cala and Laing are all given training in dealing with customer enquiries and complaints. This training takes the form of special courses as well as 'on-the-job' experience. Other firms do not send their staff on training courses. At Laing and Lovell all their staff (not just the after sales department) are given training in customer care.

(5) Advice and information given to buyers about after sales service

Seven of the companies mentioned that they send a welcoming letter to the buyer saying they will continue to look after the house and will make any repairs that are necessary. When a sale is completed purchasers receive the NHBC Buildmark information booklet. This booklet is passed directly from the builder's solicitor to the buyer's solicitor, who then gives it to the client.

Ten companies mentioned that they do an initial hand over check of the house with the buyer and ten do a six month check. At these checks the buyer will be told about who to contact with a complaint and what repairs the builder has an obligation to carry out. Six companies produce their own information packs or booklets that cover some aspects of after sales care. These information packs vary in the amount of information they contain. McCarthy & Stone produce a very detailed booklet for buyers of their retirement homes. Cala distribute a large owner's manual. This includes useful practical advice on condensation, decorating and 'running-in' the house. They also give lists of local doctors, schools, museums, kennels etc.

(6) Builders' satisfaction with their company's arrangements for dealing with complaints

Six companies were very satisfied with their own arrangements for dealing with complaints and 19 were fairly satisfied. Only three were dissatisfied at the time the questionnaire was completed. Since then, these three have informed us that they have improved their arrangements and are no longer dissatisfied.

(7) Reasons for any dissatisfaction with arrangements for dealing with complaints

Among those builders who gave reasons for any dissatisfaction, the two most cited reasons are the problem of getting workmen to carry the work out and the fact that it takes a long time to get problems put right. Other problems mentioned were the fact that some complaints are made over the telephone rather than in writing and to site operators rather than to head office.
(8) Company practice that indirectly affects after sales care

The need for after sales attention is minimised where construction standards are high. If a house is carefully constructed and every effort is made to ensure that the job is done properly the first time, there will be fewer occasions on which work has to be corrected or redone.

Particular construction policies at some companies appear to favour the minimisation of construction error. For example, Laing have introduced a ten phase construction process from the completion of the foundations to the decorated house. After each phase is complete the site agent has to check the work and sign a card which is attached to a specified part of the house. Only after this has been done can the next phase be started. This system ensures accountability if anything goes wrong later and forces the site agent to check each stage personally.

Laing also have a Homebuyer's Charter which gives the buyer a guaranteed entry date. If the house is not ready on time the buyers get £50 per day until they can move in. This policy provides a good incentive for the company to finish the work on time.

(9) Sub-contractors

Sub-contractors do not seem to cause builders as many problems as might be expected. A builder can, of course, not use a sub-contractor again if they fail to do the job properly or on time. Many builders said they had a good relationship with their sub-contractors and had used the same ones for many years. The development of an understanding of the way in which the company and sub-contractors operate leads to a good rapport. Some companies devise ways of controlling the sub-contractor by, for example, retaining money from their accounts (Laing, Lovell, Wimpey). Laing actively encourage their sub-contractors to be competitive and efficient by offering a prize each month to the team that has done the work best, in terms of quality, and an annual prize for the team that gives the best performance overall. Some companies do not seem to have thought of ways of encouraging their sub-contractors to do the job properly the first time around and their only course of action is to change contractors. One company said their only comeback on the sub-contractor was to "shout at him!".

(10) Pre-occupancy check

All of the firms interviewed allow buyers to carry out pre-occupancy checks of the house. Some firms produce checklists for different items, for example, glass, work surfaces, sanitary ware etc. Others ask for items to be listed room by room. Others do not provide a check list, only a blank form.
It is easier to go round the house checking things off against a list than to go round without any guiding notes. Balfour Beatty for example, produces a detailed list for buyers to complete at the pre-occupancy inspection.

(11) Post-occupancy checks

All firms carry out repair work in response to requests from buyers at some stage after they have moved in. The majority of firms carry out their main check after six months.

This is a reasonable length of time for the house to be "run-in" and for problems to emerge. Some companies, for example Laing, do checks at two weeks, one month and six months after the entry date. They then send a questionnaire to the buyer after eight months asking about the service they received. Constant monitoring of this kind is useful for the buyer provided problems noted are dealt with promptly.

(12) The responsibility of the house buyer

One recurring point mentioned during interviews with builders is that many complaints and problems could be avoided if the house buyer read instruction and information leaflets first. An often repeated analogy is that drawn between a new house and a new car. For example,


Buyers often fail to run the house in gently because they are not aware of the need for proper ventilation, heating etc. This is not because the information is not available to them. All new buyers are given the NHBC information booklet which gives many practical tips on how to treat the house. The main problem appears to be that many people do not read the information until the problem has emerged. Buyers of consumer durables frequently behave in a similar way, only reading the instructions when there is a breakdown.

"The day they move in they're very excited so they don't tend to read things. They don't tend to sit down - it's not really bedtime reading. The only time they read it is when they've got a problem."

The builder should encourage the buyer to read all the information at the outset.
One possibility would be to have a quiz where the correct answers can be found in the information provided, with a small prize for every entrant who gets above a certain score, and a bigger prize for the first fully correct form drawn at head office each month. Another possibility would be to produce a video which highlights the key points (East Lancashire Training and Enterprise Council distributes thousands of videos to small employers to introduce their role, in preference to writing to them). Perhaps NHBC could produce a video and sell it to individual companies.

(13) Dealing with a problem

The majority of companies and the NHBC recommend that all requests for repairs are written and sent to the person responsible for after sales care, at head office. Telephone calls and verbal requests to site staff are discouraged. All companies would, however, respond to a telephone call in an emergency. Only Beazer say that they are quite happy for people to approach them informally and do not insist on letters. While this approach is convenient for the customer when their request is met promptly and satisfactorily, a written record of complaints is useful if things do not go as planned.

Laing have introduced a standard form for recording telephone complaints so that they are not forgotten about. The way in which a request or complaint is dealt with after it has been received varies from company to company. In some companies the records are dealt with by one person who arranges for the work to be carried out. Other firms discuss all the outstanding work to be done at weekly meetings (Laing and MacLeod). This approach means that work is not being forgotten about and is constantly under review. Lovell maintain a computerised record of all the contacts (letters and telephone calls) they have had with a client and when any work was due to be carried out and what the outcome was. This allows them to check up on the progress of any particular piece of work.

Guaranteed response times are reassuring for the customer. Laing, for example, undertake to respond within three days, as stated in their Homebuyer's Charter,

"to respond within 3 days, or sooner if necessary, to any problems which may arise after you have taken occupation."

(14) Company policy for dealing with complaints

Just over half of the companies (16) prefer to deal with all complaints together at a set time. This is usually at the time of the six month check. They feel that this makes the best use of their time, rather than going back to the house every time some minor problem emerges. Nine companies said that they will try to do minor repairs as they arise but will save more major but non-emergency work until it can be dealt with together. Ten companies deal with any minor 'snagging' problems as soon as they arise.
There is no best way of dealing with complaints but it is very important that house buyers are told what the company policy is.

(15) The distinction between major and minor faults

Only one company (Cala) appears to have a specific policy on how to distinguish between minor and major faults. They provide a list for staff of faults that come under both categories for example:

**Minor Problems**
- defects which do not effect the structure of the property
- works which can be handled at the maintenance department level
- tasks that cause minimum disturbance to the customer's daily routine at home
- costs are within the budget allocated for after sales service

**Major problems**
- defects of a structural nature which cause concern and loss of confidence
- input from other professional sources needed
- costs which would exceed budget

Eleven of the companies said their staff used their discretion in deciding whether a problem was a major or a minor one. Six of the companies treat all problems as if they were of equal importance.

(16) Length of time for repairs if site is non-operational

Ten companies admitted that it takes longer to deal with complaints once the site is finished. Ten other companies said that the same service was provided whether the site was still operational or not.

(17) Other problems

When asked whether there are any other problems with after sales service there was a wide variety of responses. The most often quoted example (seven responses) was that there should be guidelines about what the buyer can reasonably expect the builder to be responsible for. Three companies mentioned that buyers do not bother to read the information that is provided. Eagle Homes report that one of the most common complaints they received was about condensation and mould until they produced their own booklet on the problem. Since the introduction of the booklet "the volume of complaints has dropped dramatically". The important point about this written information is well illustrated in this statement from Eagle Homes:
"How can owners be persuaded that time spent studying information for new dwellings will repay them by preventing many problems in 'running in'?"

This point is echoed in the following statement in Scotland's Homebuyer's Guide (December 1988).

"If more buyers ... studied their copy of the Home Owner's Handbook fewer after sales problems would be likely to occur."

(18) Approach to carrying out repairs

Several companies pointed out that they realise the importance of not aggravating a client further while carrying out the remedial work. Wimpey, Laing and Lovell recognise the need not to wear muddy boots in the house or leave a mess. Laing provide clean overalls at the site office and Wimpey provide a uniform and encourage workmen not to,

"wear muddy boots and clamber all over the carpet. It's the customers home and it's got to be treated accordingly".

Lovell have special vans which are used for after sales work. The vans,

"carry dust sheets, hoovers, everything to do the work. If you get joiners down from the site they just appear, do the work and disappear, whereas we tend to use a bit more finesse. We tidy up, smooth things over."

Builders also recognise the need to deal with repairs promptly to prevent the problem being magnified.

"So what may start off to do with a door handle or a heater control not working could end up as a full scale battle as it were, with the client unhappy."

"if the guy doesn't turn up at 10 o'clock on Tuesday, by the time he does get round there it's not the same complaint he's looking at, you know it's sort of grown arms and legs."
(19) Following up any work undertaken

Several companies take the trouble to phone up customers the day after repair work is due to be done to check that it was carried out properly. It is also quite common practice to give the customer a maintenance form to sign when they are satisfied that the work has been done. Eagle have given up getting the maintenance form signed as many clients refused to sign or did not bother to.

(20) The demands of the housebuyer

There appears to be widespread agreement among builders that only a few people complain and that the majority are very happy with the service they receive. This is at odds with the high percentage of buyers who say they would not buy from the same builder again. At least one builder thinks that people are more aware of what they are entitled to than they were in the past. This is conveyed in the quote,

"As I was saying it's that Esther Rantzen, I think she's taught them how to respond."

Some builders find that older customers buying more expensive houses are the ones most likely to complain.

"The higher up the ladder you go, the better the customer's aware of what they're entitled to."

"People are far more demanding, the more expensive the house."

House buyers also make complaints and ask for repairs after the two year maintenance warranty has run out. Some of these requests can be met. Cala, for example, will do repairs that are required as a result of their workmanship even after two years is up.

"We would never turn our back on a client."

Some of the requests for maintenance are very unreasonable. For example, Wimpey received a letter about a house built 23 years before.

"It was a house that we handed over in 1967, and the chap wrote and said ... There was water in his back garden and what were we going to do about it. The answer to that is we're not going to do anything about it ... it's 23 years ago."

Complaints are also made at unreasonable times, for example on Christmas day or on Friday afternoons.
"You're always going to get the odd customer who wants things done - and they want them done today - and that includes Christmas day."

"... on the afternoon of a Friday, the man comes home and he's had two or three drinks. His wife gets a grip of him, winds him up, he comes on the phone and gives me an earbashing".

(21) The builder's relationship with the NHBC

All the builders we spoke to said they had a good relationship with the NHBC and that they are very helpful. However, most also said that they have very little contact with the NHBC. Most builders are satisfied with the way the NHBC operate and accept any judgements they make after investigating a dispute. Very few cases are not settled after a decision taken by the NHBC and therefore few cases progress as far as arbitration. Of 185 conciliation exercises undertaken by the NHBC in 1988 only eight were referred to independent arbitrators.

7. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Although many companies are currently giving after sales care a high priority there is a wide range of quality in terms of the service they provide in practice. Adoption of good after sales policies by all companies will raise the quality of service received by the house buyer. This should automatically lead to benefits for the builder, in that satisfied customers will buy from the same builders again and recommend them to their friends.

(1) Staff training and guidance

Although 82% of the companies said they give after sales service a high priority this is not reflected in the amount of training and guidance they provide for their staff. SCC believes that training for staff is a vital part of developing a successful after sales policy. Written guidance for staff on how to deal with enquiries and complaints is a valuable supplement and back up for training schemes.

Recommendation 1

SCC recommends that companies identify staff to be responsible for after sales service. Members of the after sales team and all staff dealing directly with the public should be given training in dealing with customers. We also recommend that staff are given written guidance notes on how to handle customer enquiries and complaints.
(2) Information for the house buyer

Many problems appear to arise because buyers do not read the information they are given or because there is a breakdown in communication between them and the builder. Builders should try to make sure that they spell out their policy for after sales service to the buyer. This message should be communicated in writing and should state whether the builder will undertake repairs straight away or whether they prefer to 'save them up' until the six month check. It is helpful for this message to be conveyed by other means (verbally or by video). Leaflets and information packs dealing with specific problems, such as condensation, are very effective in reducing the number of complaints about a certain type of problem.

It will always be difficult to ensure that any information produced will actually be read. However, well-written attractively designed leaflets are more likely to succeed in attracting the attention of the buyer.

Recommendation 2

Builders should produce their own information packs or leaflets for buyers which give details of their after sales policy and give advice on how to deal with specific problems. This information should be designed and written in an attractive way to encourage buyers to read it. Other means of conveying the information, for example videos, should be considered.

(3) Construction practice

Some companies employ certain construction practices, such as stage checks and incentives for contractors that should minimise errors during construction. This approach is obviously to the advantage of both builders and buyers, as it cuts down on the number of defects that have to be corrected at a later stage. It is also important that builders develop a good relationship with their sub-contractors. Schemes that encourage sub-contractors to do the work efficiently and correctly are likely to help maintain a good relationship and promote high quality construction practices.

Recommendation 3

Builders should adopt construction practices that lead to the minimisation of construction error. A Quality Assurance strategy should include the adoption of BS5750 and encouraging sub-contractors to do the work properly and on time.
(4) Handling complaints

Although all of the companies are currently very or fairly satisfied with their arrangements for dealing with complaints, there appears to be room for improvement in this area. Builders should devise a systematic way of recording and dealing with complaints. This includes recording telephone complaints and maintaining an up-to-date record of the progress made in getting the work done. Many companies will find that the most efficient way of handling this kind of register is on computer. Regular meetings to discuss the progress being made with individual complaints ensures that work is not forgotten about and is constantly under review. Following up completed work by telephone or letter is a good way of making sure customers are satisfied and emphasises a caring image.

Recommendation 4

Builders should devise a systematic way of dealing with complaints that includes a comprehensive register, a regular review process and a means of checking with the customer that the work was done properly.
APPENDIX I

QUESTIONNAIRE ON AFTER SALES SERVICES

Please tick the appropriate box.

1. What priority does your company give to after sales service?
   
   High priority  ( )
   Medium priority  ( )
   Low priority  ( )

2a. Is there a specific department or individual within your organisation responsible for after-sales service?
   
   Yes  ( )
   No  ( )

2b. If yes, please give name and contact address.

3. Does your company issue guidance to personnel in dealing with after sales enquiries or customer complaints? Please enclose a copy of any written guidance.

   Yes  ( )
   No  ( )
4. What advice and information do you give to house buyers concerning after sales service. For example, in what way are customers advised to report any complaints they may have? Enter details below. Please enclose a copy of any written materials issued.

5. Are you satisfied with your company's present arrangements for handling customer complaints?

Very satisfied   ( )
Fairly satisfied  ( )
dissatisfied      ( )

Reasons for any dissatisfaction / improvements needed?

6. What is your company's policy on dealing with customer complaints? For instance, are 'snagging' defects dealt with separately or all together at a specified time?

Please include any policy documents.
7. How does your company distinguish between 'minor' and 'major' faults?

8. To what extent does the length of time it takes to repair a fault depend on whether the site is still operational?

9. Is there any specific aspect of after-sales service you would like the Scottish Consumer Council to study?
10. Please mention any other issues or problems to do with after-sales service for home buyers which we could examine.

Name of company:

Name of representative:

Position within company:

Address for future correspondence:

Thank you for your help.