

Omfax News

Building partnerships

The new system of Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA) being introduced by the government has identified the importance of partnership working. It places focus on whether people who use public services can access them easily and how these services should be delivered through working in partnership. For social housing organisations, the most important partnership is that between landlord and tenant and it depends on having the right approach and good communication. Omfax has been working for over 21 years building partnerships with clients and delivering systems that focus on the customer, emphasising the partnership between landlord and tenant. We continue to work with clients on new approaches and better solutions. In this newsletter we look at some of our latest developments.

You don't need to start from scratch

Time is money and money is getting tighter; many housing organisations are having to look even more critically at how time and money is used. One of the victims of these cutbacks has been the production of new tenants handbooks or updating and reprinting of existing ones. At the same time, tenants' demands and expectations of services are increasing. So it is perhaps even more important that landlords are able to provide up-to-date and accessible information on what services they can provide and guidance as to how tenants can help themselves.

At Omfax we have responded to this context of tightened budgets by offering a range of 'off-the-shelf' handbooks and guides. These are available to order in quantities that will fit any budget. We have also developed a streamlined 'package' approach to producing new tenancy, leaseholder or repairs handbooks, based on model texts which have been created from our years of experience in this field. The model text provides an excellent starting point for each organisation to refine into their own unique handbook, saving time and money.

Recently Raglan housing association has been developing a Tenants Handbook using our 'Package' approach. This book will complement the Repairs Handbook we developed for them six years ago and which we update about every 3 years.

You can visit our website www.omfax.co.uk to find out more about how this 'package' approach works.

News at a glance



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E-Training - for quality service

When any of your customers contacts you, they want to be confident that whoever answers the phone knows what they are talking about, understands the nature of their enquiry and can respond to it knowledgeably - and also that they would get as good a service if any other member of staff had dealt with their enquiry. It is about the consistency of the response being offered.

At the heart of all good customer service are customer advisors who know what they are talking about and have a good basic understanding of the topics they are handling. But with the best will in the world, it is difficult and time consuming to get people fully trained.

How do you achieve this?

- Do customer advisors just pick it up and muddle through asking their colleagues questions when they get stuck.
- Perhaps they have some initial training when they start. What form does this take? Do they take it all in?
- Do you have ways of checking that all your staff have the same standard of knowledge and are interpreting policies in the same way?

At the heart of any customer contact service is a simple fact - to provide a confident service customer advisors need to know what they are talking about; they need to have a good basic understanding of the topics they are handling. But with the best will in the world, it is difficult and time consuming to get people fully trained.

This challenge of achieving consistency in service within housing customer services has been at the heart of work we do at Omfax, from the manuals of early days to the Keyfax response management systems of today. We continue to address this issue wherever improvement can be made. So, at the suggestion of several of our clients, we are now developing e-learning courses for housing front-line staff.

The first course, **Essential Repairs Reporting**, is a substantial, comprehensive course for staff who regularly deal with repair requests from tenants. It gives staff the opportunity to learn the different elements of a building and understand the common faults that occur. It covers the issues of tenant responsibilities for repairs and how to prioritise the different types of repairs.

Effective Repairs Reporting comprises four modules covering all parts of the home: doors, windows, roofs, electrics, plumbing, gas, fencing, heating, etc. It includes a range of explanatory diagrams and uses a set of self test exercises to encourage learning. Learners have a three month study period, so they can study the modules in whatever order they like, they can go at their own pace and fit it in with other commitments, work or personal. At the end of each module, they will take a formal test. If all four module tests are passed they are awarded a certificate as a guarantee of competence.

Our Effective Repairs Reporting E-training course has been developed with the active involvement of Orbit Housing Group who run a large contact centre staffed with 30 customer advisors.

"E-learning is proving to be a successful training method for our Call Handling staff, the training takes place at the trainees desk without the support of a trainer. The trainee learns at their own pace without feeling pressurised to keep up with the class, and training sessions are planned into the advisers shift when the call volume is low. The trainee can spend as much time as they need learning each topic thoroughly and then self test along the way until they complete the module before taking the formal test."

Daphne Arnold, CSC Support Manager, Customer Service Centre, Orbit Services

A management console allows managers to monitor the progress and achievement of learners.

For 2010, further courses are planned covering other aspects of the housing service.

Find out more by visiting

www.omfax.co.uk/omfax-e-learning.aspx or

contact us on 01869 242967 or e-mail

sales@omfax.co.uk for a brochure

and registration/price list - we

can also issue you with an ID and

password to go onto our learning

management system and look at

a demonstration of the course.



Tackling the 'responsibility' balance

One of our clear aims at Omfax is helping our clients find ways to build better relationships with their customers. We do this by providing response management systems and guidance for the front line staff so they can be responsive and consistent in their dealings with the customer. We also produce clearly written handbooks and guides that explain the services you provide and what your customers should do in particular circumstances relating to their housing situation.

In recent years there has been a focus on going further and trying to address what we might call the 'responsibility balance' between landlord and tenant so it is more of a contractual partnership than a state of dependency.

The revolution in customer services and in customer consultation and participation has brought about enormous changes in the overall relationship between the customer body and the housing provider. But there is still a challenge at the level of the individual - to get customers to acknowledge what their role is in relation to their landlord, rather than just what the landlord will or won't do for them. This needs to be a persuasive and educative process.

One initiative that we have been involved with has been the production of a 'Welcome' DVD for new tenants. Lasting about 6 minutes, the DVD runs through the most essential and useful information residents need to know about their tenancies; what is expected of them and what they can expect of their landlord. The first DVD has been produced for The Accord Group. They were keen to close a perceived knowledge gap about what was involved in being a tenant. They recognised that people arrive in rented homes without necessarily knowing what a tenancy involves. They just want a home; the legal side, the responsibilities, even who the landlord is, are not something they are concerned about as they settle in.

"We launched the DVD and handbook at our annual residents' conference and it was really well received. We've had some very positive feedback and the staff team are very proud of what we've achieved in partnership with Omfax. There's no question in our view it's improved things for our residents."

*Boris Worrall, Head of PR and Communication
Accord Housing Group*

A DVD is a valuable compliment to other leaflets or booklets. It is accessible and stimulating with sound and visuals that are instantly attractive. It is a powerful way of getting information across to your customers - particularly for those who dislike reading or struggle to remember what was said during a sign-up interview. And the DVD format can easily include voice-overs in other languages to help residents whose first language is not English.

This DVD is just one initiative being taken to help create better tenant-landlord partnerships at the household level. We are interested in hearing of other initiatives that we can pass on. One in particular we have heard of appeals to us: providing new tenants with a toolkit - literally a screwdriver, pliers, hammer, spirit level, etc so they have the equipment to carry out small jobs around the home themselves. This fits in perfectly with a booklet we first issued 10 years ago - the Omfax 'Handy Hints for Householders'. This gives step-by-step instructions with drawings on how to do basic tasks around the home. Originally it just addressed such tasks as unblocking sinks, resetting trip switches and setting heating programmers. In later editions we have added other tasks such as replacing door handles, adjusting kitchen cupboards - all of which tenants are now expected to do as part of their side of the tenancy contract. An increasing number of organisations are distributing these booklets to their tenants.

Perhaps you have an idea that needs developing? Let us know and we might be in a position to help. For more information on our Handy Hints booklet or Welcome DVD, please go to www.omfax.co.uk.

"The handbook is brilliant! It's very, very handy, and most importantly it provides me with all the relevant information that I'm after."

Mr Hussain, Accord Housing Group resident



Safe working

Visiting residents in their homes, driving around your housing areas, working at computers, reporting dangerous situations, dealing with stress; these are all matters that concern busy housing staff and it is a real challenge to ensure that they are aware of how to do things safely.

Omfax produces a compact, easy-to-understand booklet called Think Safety, specifically written for housing staff. You can give a copy to each member of staff and use it for periodic briefing sessions with them about difficult safety issues relating to their work. Think Safety is available as a standard booklet but we also offer options for including your corporate image.

To learn more about Think Safety go to www.omfax.co.uk/think_safety_housing.aspx where you can also see prices and order a preview copy.

Omfax Conference 12th May

put it in your diary now!

The Omfax Conference provides a great opportunity for our clients to meet each other, share news and ideas, and hear about what Omfax has been doing over the past year and is planning for the year ahead.

Don't miss out ... please put 12th May for the Omfax Conference in your diary now.

We will be sending out invitations with an outline programme quite soon but if you know you want to come, why not let us now. Just drop an e-mail to gail@omfax.co.uk.

As usual, we will be offering two free places to each of our clients but we are happy to welcome others who want to come, for which we make a very reasonable charge.

The Conference will be held at the Highpoint Conference Centre on the outskirts of Leicester... only a short distance from the M1. We always have such good feedback about this unique and friendly place that we return every year.

Publications by Omfax include:

Guides

- Handy hints
- Gadgets guide
- Think safety
- Repairs Reporting Guide

Handbooks

- Repairs Handbook for tenants
- The Tenancy Handbook
- Leaseholders Handbook
- Sheltered Housing Handbook

Want more information?

To find out more about any of our products, please email sales@omfax.co.uk, give us a call on 01869 242967 or visit www.omfax.co.uk

