

AN EVALUATION OF THE CUSTOMER SATISFACTION MONITORING SYSTEM IN A DECENT HOMES PROGRAMME

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As part of a Knowledge Transfer Partnership (KTP) project with a social housing organisation to assess the impact of its Decent Homes Programme (DHP), an initial evaluation of the customer satisfaction monitoring system was undertaken. The survey system used by the organisation is the Vision Management System (VMS), a piece of software used by a number of housing organisations in the UK to process customer satisfaction information collected mainly through questionnaires. The scores are monitored at various levels throughout the organisation at both strategic and operational levels; they are also included as part of the performance assessment of building contractors. This general evaluation was achieved firstly through analysing how the VMS is used within the organisation and the overall scores produced. Additionally, unstructured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders throughout the organisation, contractor partners, and a tenant. This initial evaluation also showed that customer satisfaction with the building work was seen by the majority of stakeholders interviewed, from across the organisation and contractor partners, as an important indicator of the success of the overall programme. This paper will present some initial and preliminary findings as the final results will be presented in 2012.

Keywords: customer satisfaction, decent homes programme, information technology, social housing, vision management system.

INTRODUCTION

The Housing Act (1988) introduced important changes to the provision of social housing through several initiatives including Housing Associations becoming new providers of housing through the transfer of the housing stock from local authorities (Williams *et al.*, 1999). This change transformed Local Authorities from providers to enablers of social housing (Pryke and Whitehead, 1995) and paved the way for the creation of Arms Length Management Organisations (ALMOs) following the publication of the Government's Housing Green Paper (DETR, 2000). Subsequent documents, such as the Sustainable Communities Plan (ODPM, 2003a) and the Housing Bill 2003, also contributed to the framing of the present housing agenda.

In a nutshell, ALMOs are not-for-profit housing management companies 100 per cent controlled by a local authority. The specification of the requirements of ALMOs was supplied by the Government (ODPM, 2003b). Furthermore, the Government gave funding of £1.9 billion of extra investment for ALMOs in its Sustainable

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Communities plan (ODPM, 2003a). The broad aims of ALMOs are to improve the investment of housing resources, while ensuring that housing services to tenants meet demanding targets for improvement (Audit Commission, 2003). Although controlled by the local authority, an ALMO should retain the freedom to manage the housing stock in a "business-like" way (Audit Commission, 2003). The motivation for local authorities to create ALMOs is the need to meet the Government's Public Services Agreement (PSA) target for Decent Homes.

To respond to this new housing agenda the Nottingham City Council created Nottingham City Homes (NCH) in 2005 to manage its 29,000+ council homes after receiving support from tenants and the Government. The creation of this ALMO also involved the transfer of 1,400 staff from the City Council. However, it was not until 2009 that a second inspection from the Audit Commission awarded NCH the required "two-star rating" allowing it successfully to bid for Decent Homes funding (DETR, 2000). The Decent Homes Programme has been locally branded as "Secure, Warm, Modern" (SWM) highlighting its emphasis on replacing windows and doors, installing central heating systems, and refurbishing kitchens and bathrooms; these measures also reflect the priorities set by the tenants in upgrading their homes to the UK government's Decent Homes standard (DCLG, 2006). The relationship between the Audit Commission inspections and NCH promoted an organisational culture focused on measurable targets, as NCH aspires to a future "three-star" rating. Through these inspections it was also perceived that the Audit Commission laid strong emphasis on the monitoring of customer satisfaction while recommending the use of the Vision Management Software (VMS) to measure this.

In this context, Nottingham City Homes, in partnership with Nottingham Business School, are conducting a two-year Knowledge Transfer Partnership (KTP) impact study on the wider social benefits of the SWM programme in the city (NCH, 2009). As part of this project, an initial and exploratory evaluation of the use of the Vision Management Software (VMS) at NCH was undertaken. Its aim was to verify that the system met the needs (both strategic and operational) of the DHP, to evidence its value to NCH and its contractor partners, and to ensure that it was being used to best effect. This paper will convey some of the initial findings of this study; the final results will be produced at the end of 2012.

THE VISION MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

The process starts with mailing survey packs to a sample of tenants who had any "Secure Warm Modern" (SWM) work completed during that given month. NCH sends batches every two weeks to various samples of tenants in order to minimise delays (other service areas within NCH are surveyed exclusively on a monthly basis). The pack contains a questionnaire, information on translation services, and a pre-paid addressed envelope in which to return the completed survey to NCH. The questionnaire comprises ten questions to be scored from 1 to 10, and an additional question regarding whether the contract workers showed their ID when visiting the property. The questionnaire also provides a space for comments, an option of completing information regarding equality and diversity, and some basic information allowing the tenant to be contacted if required.

The returned questionnaires are collated then the responses entered into the VMS software by the Business Improvement and Development team (BID) to produce various reports. For example, the BID team issues interim scores (per question and overall) for each contractor based on the returns from the first batch, and a full

monthly report including the two batches. These reports include rectification notices to contractors to resolve any issues raised by tenants. A rectification notice is created where: an issue is raised in the comments section of the questionnaire; if the overall score given by the individual is below 5.5 out of 10; or if an individual question is scored 3 or below. Rectification notices are handed to the building contractor, who is contractually obliged to re-contact the tenant and deal with the rectification within ten working days. Where positive comments are made, these are also passed back to the contractor as 'information notices'. Information from the monthly VMS reports is then disseminated throughout the organisation and to contractor partners, at varying levels of detail. It is important to highlight that the BID remit is independent of the running of the day-to-day operations of SWM programme.

The data provided by the VMS are filtered out to the organisation for various purposes and at varying levels of detail. The headline measure is the average overall score of satisfaction, included at a strategic level in NCH's Performance Management Framework and, for instance, reported in the quarterly Company Performance Report and the recently developed Balanced Scorecard report. These reports are viewed by the Executive Management Team and the Board in order for them to monitor the overall progress of the programme as part of the company's stated objectives. Information from the monthly VMS reports is then disseminated throughout the organisation and to contractor partners at varying levels of detail. For instance, project managers, property services, and contractors receive a monthly report, the customer care group receives a report every two months, and finally, the improvement teams and NCH's management team receive a quarterly report.

Building Contractors

At an operational level, the VMS is used as a key performance management tool. SWM Project Managers receive the highest level of detail from the VMS scores, allowing the analysis of the data against the contracts being managed by them. The data provided allow intense examination of contractor performance against each of the questions within the VMS survey, to identify areas of poor performance and even to determine which contractor work-stream and individual team is linked to particularly low or high scores. Project Managers meet contractors monthly to discuss VMS scores and to implement an action plan to address any areas of poor performance. Contractors also make extensive use of the information from VMS. Following meetings with the Project Managers, the contractors report that they also examine the detail of the scores by question and by team, and incorporate any findings into 'tool-box talks' with the site teams. Contractors are very clear on the importance of VMS scores. Emergency steering group meetings with the contractor may be triggered if there are low VMS scores, as these results in the implementation of action plans to resolve the issues. Contractors are also aware that VMS scores will be a factor in NCH's future investment decisions and thus influence the awarding of future contracts.

The scores are also scrutinised and discussed every two months at Customer Care Group meetings, attended by tenants, leaseholders, SWM Project Managers and Project Liaison Officers, and contractor representatives. The group inspects a report detailing each contractor's monthly score (overall, and for each of the 10 questions in the survey), comments received on the questionnaires, and the monthly response rate. The aim of the group is to maintain customer engagement in dealing with issues that may arise, and to incorporate their views on how and what improvements could be made.

EVALUATING THE VISION MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

This initial exploration will focus on the operational use of the VMS and how the system is perceived by different stakeholders, rather than on the design of the questionnaire and/or software used to process it. As previously stated, the particular system has been used by NCH following the Audit Commission's inspections; the VMS is also used by other ALMOs and housing organisations. The areas main areas explored as summarised in the next sections.

Sampling and confidence levels

The aim of any survey is to collect the views of a sample of the population, and from this to be able to generalise about the views of the population of interest as a whole (Saunders *et al.*, 2009). The focus of the VMS is therefore to collect the views of a sample of customers on their satisfaction with the SWM service they have received, and from this be able to draw conclusions about the satisfaction of all tenants and thus about the overall performance of the programme and its contractors. The way in which survey information is collected affects the level of confidence that the information collected from a sample of the population accurately reflects the views of the population as a whole (Buglear, 2004). Statistical theory indicates that issues such as sample selection and size, error and confidence level, as well as, non-response levels, could affect not only the validity and representative nature of the survey, but also the confidence that may be placed in generalising from its findings (Groves *et al.*, 2006).

Usually, a sample of at least 25% of those who have had Secure or Warm work is used; however, for the Modern stream (kitchens and bathrooms) the survey pack is sent to all customers who have had work done. The 100% sampling for Modern was introduced in November 2009, as it was felt that this stream could cause greater disruption to tenants than the Secure (windows and doors) and Warm (central heating installation) stream, because of the length of time required for the improvements to be completed. The Modern stream also represents a greater proportion of NCH's budget of the total expenditure for the overall programme. For these reasons it was felt that the Modern stream should be monitored closely.

The agreed target was to obtain a 30% response rate from those to whom the survey packs were sent. The target was set in consultation with the Customer Care Group, whose function is to scrutinise the VMS process and results. As mail surveys usually have the poorest response rate (Malhotra and Birks, 2006) additional measures were set in place. For instance, tenants are given two weeks to reply from when the questionnaire is despatched, after which the survey is closed. If the response rate is below 30% towards the end of this period, a reminder letter is sent to those who have not then replied, giving them an additional five days in which to complete and return the questionnaire. On a cumulative basis, for example, taking a period of one calendar year, the population (all those who have received SWM work) is fairly large; for instance, over the year September 2009–August 2010, work was completed in 12,624 properties. Over this period, survey packs were sent on average to 58% of these households, and 2,402 responses were received (19% of the total population). Based on this population size and number of responses, the error margin is +/- 1.8% at the 95% confidence level. This means that, for instance, if the questionnaires returned an average of 8 out of 10, we can be confident that if we surveyed the whole population, 95% of their responses would be between 7.86 and 8.14. This small margin of error indicates that we can be highly confident in the cumulative findings of the VMS

results over a year, and that statistically this is likely to represent the views of the population as a whole (Buglear, 2004).

It could also be of interest to examine sub-groups within the VMS data, such as the scores by month, by the three streams of work (Secure, Warm and Modern), and by the individual contractors. However, breaking down the data in this way results in a decline in the power of the data, i.e., there are increasing error margins as each sub-group is examined in isolation. When viewing the data by month across all contractors the error margins again are larger than for the year as a whole, varying from +/- 5.2% to +/- 8.9 for each month. This means there may be less confidence that the sample is representative of the population as a whole when broken down by month. A key part of the analysis of the VMS findings is related to the performance of individual contractors throughout the year, as each has a contractual target of achieving an average (cumulative) annual score of 8 out of 10. From the cumulative scores over the year by individual contractor, the error margins still fall within an acceptable level (mostly below +/- 5%) at this level of detail (Buglear, 2004; Malhotra and Birks, 2006). However, the same issue arises if the data are broken down even further, for instance, by month for each contractor, as this creates large error margins and thus reduces confidence in the data. In other words, although the VMS scores at this level provide an indication of the views of those who responded to the survey, it cannot confidently be claimed (statistically speaking) that the results are definitely representative of the population as a whole.

The final issue to consider is that of non-response. So far this financial year (2010/11), 37% of tenants surveyed have responded, an increase from the last financial year (2009/10) when the overall response rate was 31%. However, this does mean that the views of the majority of those surveyed are not recorded. The response rate matters only if the views of those who do respond are likely to be significantly different from the views of those who fail to respond, as is explored in greater detail in the next section.

Data Analysis and interviews

VMS data from the previous (2009/10) and current (2010/11) financial years were analysed to explore the response patterns and representative nature of data. Additionally, some general, unstructured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders throughout the organisation and contractor partners. The interviews looked for stakeholders' general views on how the success and progress of the SMW programme was and could be measured, how the information from VMS was used and whether it met their needs, and the strengths and weaknesses of the current system. Future semi-structured interviews have been agreed with these stakeholders to explore their views following this initial phase of the research, focusing on particular areas of concern. Table 1 provides a list of the interviewees in different areas - the SWM programme in all areas of the city is scheduled for completion by 2015.

Diversity

ALMOs are required to adhere to the local authority's Race Equality Schemes (Audit Commission, 2003), following the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000, as well as to any other diversity schemes. The Rented Housing Code of Practice (CRE, 1991), the Code of Practice on the Duty to Promote Race Equality (CRE, 2002), and the Equality Standard for local government (EO, 2001) also provide an approach for dealing with equality for race, gender and disability. NCH has also a particular interest in diversity; this has been identified by most local organisations as a key dimension

that needs to be considered to achieve greater community cohesion and development (NCC, 2010). However, the challenges in promoting the involvement of certain minority groups, such as BME, in the housing sector have been widely reported from different angles by ODPM (2004), Chahal (2000), the Home Office (2001), Ratcliffe (2001), and others. In this context, the characteristics (in terms of the six equality and diversity strands) of those who were surveyed and those who returned the surveys in the last financial year (April 2009-March 2010) were analysed, then compared against the make-up of NCH tenants overall. (N.B. A recommendation will be made for these six strands to be updated to the nine “protected characteristics” that now also include gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, and pregnancy and maternity, according to the UK’s Equality Act 2010).

Table 1: List of Interviewees

Area/Organisation	Interviewee
Strategy and Partnerships	Director of Strategy and Partnerships; Business Improvement Manager
Property Services, SWM team	Assistant Director Asset Management; Head of Service; Capital Programme; Communication Officer; SWM Project Manager
Contractors: FMH, Wates, Bullock, Vinshire, SPI	Customer Care Manager; Project Manager; Residents' Liaison Officer
Tenant - after SWM had been completed.	Tenant

As previously explained, the survey is currently sent to a completely random sample of tenants who have had work done under SWM, using the random sample selector in Microsoft Excel. However, the results show that the random sampling technique has achieved a reasonable spread in terms of the diversity strands, i.e., that the proportion of those from each diversity group who are sent a survey differs only slightly from the proportion of that group in the overall population. No group is significantly under-sampled, and there is only a slight over-sampling of some groups, including for example non-BME, Christian and heterosexual tenants; however, this is not a significant level of over-sampling. It is important to highlight that the respondents did not always provide information regarding the equality strands.

Viewing those who return surveys, some groups appear less responsive to the surveys, resulting in a smaller proportion of completed surveys for them than for the overall tenant profile. This includes tenants aged 41-59, those from BME groups, and those without a disability. For example, tenants aged 41-59 have a fairly low response rate (26% responded to the survey), yet represent a large proportion of the overall tenant population; as a result, the proportion of surveys returned from this age group is smaller than the overall proportion of this group in the tenant profile. This is similar to tenants from BME groups, where the response rate is 22% compared to the average response rate of 36% over this period. It also appears that tenants with a disability are more likely to return a survey than are those without a disability. However, the sample size of those aged 41-59 and those without a disability is large enough for there to be confidence in the data for these groups (with an error margin of lower than 5% at the 95% confidence level). The only groups that may need to be monitored are those from within BME groups, as currently the number of responses is relatively low in comparison with responses from the overall population. It therefore appears that the random sampling technique currently used achieves a representative sample in terms of the six equality and diversity strands (i.e., gender, age, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, disability). However, lower response rates from certain groups, in particular BME

tenants, means that these groups are slightly under-represented in the final sample of surveys that are returned. The scores provided by the different groups are analysed next.

When trying to determine whether there are any differences in the average scores given by different groups (although tenants rarely provided information regarding their religion or sexuality), the results showed that gender has minimal impact on the score given, with both males and females awarding very similar average scores. Results were similar with the disability strand: both disabled and able-bodied respondents gave similar scores on average, with the score given by disabled tenants being marginally higher. Satisfaction with the SWM work appears to increase with age, with older tenants giving higher scores than those in younger age brackets. The highest average score is given by tenants aged over 85, with an average score of over 9 out of 10. The average scores given by tenants aged 18-24 and 25-44 is below the target of 8 out of 10, at 7.37 and 7.95, respectively. As approximately one third of NCH tenants falls into these age brackets, further investigation into why the results seem to be so consistent within certain age groups and remarkably different across age groups may be worthwhile.

The average scores by ethnicity show that satisfaction amongst BME groups is below the overall average, and lower than that of non-BME groups. In particular, satisfaction amongst mixed-ethnicity, Asian and Chinese tenants is below the target of 8. However, it should be noted that these findings are based on a fairly small sample size for these groups. For instance, an analysis across all VMS surveys for the 14 service areas (therefore a much larger sample size) shows that the profile of tenants returning the surveys is very similar to the overall tenant profile. The situation should be monitored through the rest of the financial year to check whether this is a significant finding. In addition, it may be beneficial to undertake further modelling to understand the interaction of various factors on satisfaction scores, e.g., whether the age profile of BME groups plays a more significant role in determining scores than does ethnicity.

Some stakeholders felt that the survey format was not particularly accessible to certain tenants, such as those with visual impairments and those for whom English is not their first language. Although some attempt has been made to address this (for instance, a telephone number is given in large print as an alternative to completing the paper form, and a language translation sheet is included), some felt that more could be done pro-actively to encourage responses from minority groups. However, these results are preliminary, as they will need to be revised after the processing of all of the completed questionnaires to arrive throughout the year.

Surveys, building contractors, and benchmarking

A common perception among contractors and the SWM team is that only those tenants who have an issue or complaint make the effort to return a survey. However, a general analysis of the surveys returned demonstrated that the most common average score per survey is 10 out of 10, followed by 9 and 8 out of 10. This is in contrast with the initial perception, as many more surveys are returned with highly positive scores than with low scores. Over the last six months (i.e., until October 2010), 1,318 surveys were returned with an average score of between 6 and 10, compared to 114 surveys with average scores of between 1 and 5. This misconception among contractors may be due to the fact that dealing with rectification notices from negative responses takes up far greater resources than where there is a positive response, which requires no

further action. Therefore, contractors spend more time and resources in dealing with issues raised through VMS, rather than with results of the positive scores.

The most widely cited benefit of the VMS amongst stakeholders is its use as a performance management and improvement tool. The conclusion is as a result of the ability to track performance and examine in detail specific issues from the information supplied from VMS. Thus, it can be used to monitor the overall performance of the programme, as well as that of individual contractors and their teams. It allows managers to track whether certain patterns are raising the scores or comments, through focusing on the cause of issues, such as whether they concern communications, cleanliness, etc. Several contractors explained that their monthly VMS scores are displayed on staff notice boards, to highlight issues as well as advertising positive scores and comments. The scores are used to motivate staff and to emphasise the importance of VMS and customer service. As well as sharing and discussing scores with those delivering the work, the scores are also monitored by the internal managements of each respective contractor. The VMS means that those responsible for the work are held accountable for its quality, and through the rectifications process are bound to address any problems arising as a result of their work. Because the VMS results in actions and plans to improve identified areas, it is seen as part of a “journey of improvement”. It therefore provides more than mere retrospective monitoring of performance; it also enables the pro-active management of the delivery of the programme. This is supported by trends in the VMS cumulative scores, which have continuously improved from 2009/2010 until January 2011.

The impact of the VMS also drives improvement through benchmarking, particularly across the contractors delivering within the programme. Several respondents stated that it introduces an element of competition among contractors to achieve the best score, with this factor used in motivating the teams. The prominence of the VMS scores within the SWM team, and the scrutiny to which contractors are subjected by Project Managers and the Customer Care Group, ensures that the importance of customer care is always emphasised – and again ensures accountability for this. As a result, stakeholders felt that the VMS has driven real improvements in the service, throughout the programme delivery. A Project Manager stated that the VMS “forces you to look at the service we're delivering, to improve, to work in partnership”. As a result, focus on quality and customer satisfaction has been embedded throughout the programme; for example, one contractor stated that as a result of the VMS the contractor has become “a lot more service driven here”.

Impact of the different SWM streams

The data were analysed also to show the average score per question by each stream. They show that over the last six months, the Secure (windows and doors) and Warm (central heating) streams have generally been scored higher for most questions, compared to the Modern (kitchens and bathrooms) stream. Such a finding could support the views stated by the contractors and the Project Managers: that the work carried out under the Modern stream is by its nature more disruptive to the tenant. For example, to replace entire kitchens and bathrooms, the contractors are in the property for longer, there is more mess created by the scale of the work, and tenants' core facilities are put out of use for the duration. In addition, the upgraded central heating (using standard gas boilers and white radiators) and windows make little visible difference to the internal situation of the house, while the successful upgrading of kitchens and bathrooms is a considerable change; not all tenants may regard such as

favourable, e.g., if existing or their own modifications (such as additional cupboard space in the kitchen) are removed. However, the difference between the Modern and other streams is not significant (the majority remain within one point of difference), and the average score is above the contractual target of 8. There is also little difference across the ten questions, with the majority of average scores between 8 and 9. There appear to be no particular areas for concern, with contractors scoring well in the areas of contractor conduct, care and cleanliness, quality of work, and communications.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Results

This initial analysis showed that customer satisfaction with the DHP work was seen by the majority of stakeholders interviewed, from across the organisation and contractor partners and tenants, as an important indicator of the success of the overall programme. It also showed that the random sampling technique used by NCH has been successful in reaching all groups when compared with the overall makeup of NCH tenants. However, lower response rates were found from tenants aged 41-59 (26%) and from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) group (22%) when compared with the overall response rate (36%). In contrast with the interviewees' expectations, most of the surveys provide an average score of 10 out of 10, which shows that most tenants used the survey to give positive feedback about the programme. It also shows that mechanisms to deal with problems as the work progresses (e.g., rectification notices) increase tenant satisfaction. The most widely cited benefit of the VMS is its use as a performance management and improvement tool, given its ability to track general building contractor performance and identify specific issues. The VMS is therefore perceived as a means for NCH to start a dialogue with building contractors, to encourage them to check their own performance, and for NCH to improve its relationship tenants.

Certain areas for further research are identified from this initial analysis as follows: a more detailed analysis of the surveys is required in comparison with other surveys conducted by NCH with its tenants; an investigation into the low response rates by BME and the 41-59 age group, and into possible barriers certain groups may experience with the format of the survey; an investigation into external factors that could influence responses (such as reactions to interactions with the City Council and/or other areas of NCH); further semi-structured interviews on specific issues and following presentation of these preliminary results to different stakeholders; an evaluation of different survey systems that could include/focus on the measurement of "social outcomes" (CO, 2009) as opposed to focusing exclusively on specific operational outputs, because the Audit Commission has been closed and the "star rating system" has been abolished.

ABBREVIATIONS

ALMO:	Arms-Length Management Organisation
BID:	Business Improvement and Development Team (NCH)
BME:	Black and Minority Ethnic
DHP:	Decent Homes Programme
NCH:	Nottingham City Homes
SWM:	Secure, Warm, Modern (as the DHP has been branded in Nottingham)

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