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## Reconnecting with customers – Stonewater’s new approach to housing management

By Dave Lockerman, Director of Housing Operations, Stonewater

**Over the years, I’ve been part of, have helped to implement and have led specialist, generic, patch-based and patchless housing management models. But is there a winning delivery method? Sadly, the answer is *probably not*.**

Stonewater manages 40,000 homes, serving over 93,000 customers across 134 local authority areas. We currently deliver housing management through a national, specialist model with expertise around tenancy, neighbourhoods and antisocial behaviour (ASB).

This model is supported by a novel initiative, which I believe is different from any other provider.

We have a pool of 40 colleagues on flexible contracts, based no more than 20 miles from a scheme. These general skilled colleagues can attend site for things like estate inspections, property checks, key management and much more, which frees up capacity for our specialist colleagues to manage more complex cases.

This approach has worked well for us, driving efficiency with transactional satisfaction holding up well too.

### ***Customer feedback: The catalyst for change***

Having started my housing career as a housing officer, I do have a leaning towards specialist working. It’s natural for human behaviour to lean in and focus more on areas that individuals, or teams, are particularly strong in delivering. Yet this can lead to inconsistent customer service and poor satisfaction.

While the better housing review stressed the need for localised approaches and the consumer standards require us to be responsive to local needs, I’ve always advocated that strong compliance with the consumer standards should be a byproduct of delivering high quality customer service. And it was the feedback from customers that led the team at Stonewater to look at evolving our service model.

We carried out perception surveys prior to the Tenant Satisfaction Measures (TSMs) and saw consistent themes in the feedback and frustrations, which were replicated in our TSM results. Customers told us 'we don't see you enough', 'you don't look after our estate anymore', 'I don't know who to speak to' and 'I don't know who my housing officer is'. We knew something needed to change.

### ***Evolving to meet local needs***

When considering opportunities for change, Stonewater's national geography adds complexity to the situation and if we wanted to pursue the route of small generic management patches of around 250 homes, it would cost upwards of an additional £3m. We could never justify that being a sensible use of customers' money.

The current operating environment is driving lots of providers to think about locality. For us, this hasn't been about going back in time to a 1990s approach. Expectations, customer needs and the tools we have to do our job have all moved on dramatically. And we knew our approach could evolve too.

We wanted to test a new delivery model, by evolving from our current approach, rather than reverting back to where we started. We chose Somerset as a region to test a new approach in, basing the decision on stock density, case numbers, a mix of urban and rural schemes – but also the lowest performing TSMs in terms of overall satisfaction.

The pilot scheme has involved us bringing specialist colleagues together into a team of four to cover the geography, an area of 2,774 homes.

### ***Trusted partnerships***

We have been able to contact all customers in the selected geography, giving customers a face to a name, explaining who does what and how to get into contact directly. We've also been able to share when we'll be on site and have provided regular newsletters with local news and useful information.

This method has enabled us to not only build back trust with customers, but we've also seen stronger local stakeholder relationships and the ability to integrate closer with communities and agree on local action plans.

Internally it's also encouraged closer collaboration. Weekly standup meetings with repairs team colleagues ensure we are properly working around the customer's needs rather than just passing tasks or issues between teams. The team are now also directly involved in contract management meetings, vastly improving accountability.

### ***Somerset: A model for our future***

On reflection, at the start of the pilot I was eager to get working and make sure we were listening and responding to customer feedback – it was the right thing to do. I didn't anticipate the difference it could make to our TSMs.

Somerset has seen an incredible 25% increase in overall satisfaction and is performing better than other Stonewater areas in nearly every single metric.

So, can you be a large, national provider and offer a local service? Absolutely. Do you need to go to small patches to be successful? Definitely not.

Our scrutiny panel have taken a look at the Somerset pilot to see why it worked and found:

- Communication – improvements in customer satisfaction were driven by increased communication with customers and stakeholders
- Relationships – increased visibility of colleagues, better customer insight and improved cross-team working also contributed to a positive perception of the service
- Partnerships – improvements in partnership working internally and externally directly contributed to better outcomes for customers
- Coordination and collaboration – the approach provided a better opportunity for cross-departmental working and efficiencies between services, which benefit customer service delivery.

There isn't a one size fits all, golden delivery model, but these elements have to be the key components to the effective and successful delivery of services, regardless of size, location or approach.

Our scrutiny panel have recommended that we scale the Somerset approach, so we're going to extend the model and test it in an additional geography area. One aspect we'll test further is how we can better integrate with our repairs service. I suspect that really integrating the delivery of responsive repairs into the locality model will be a game changer. It will mean that we're working more holistically around the customer and cutting out inefficiencies, such as having two colleagues attending the same scheme at the same time.

We're certainly not perfect and the tested locality model is just one way we are responding to shifting customer expectations and needs. But the results, so far, are hugely positive and long may that continue.