

Croydon Housing Scrutiny Panel



Scrutiny of housing Responsive Repair service.

November 2017

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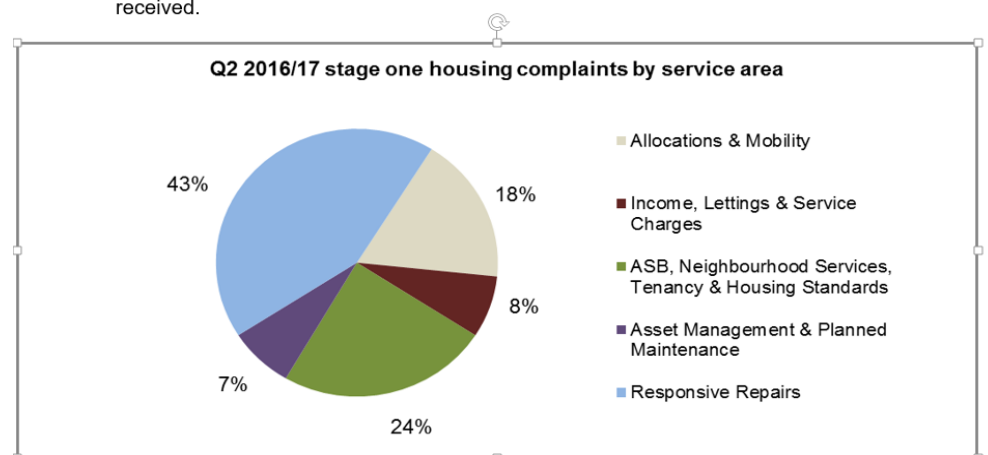
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1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 In April 2012 the social housing regulator, the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA), introduced revisions to its regulatory standards. There is now a greater emphasis on local mechanisms to involve tenants in scrutinising landlord performance and resolving problems with housing services. The regulations state that “*tenants should have the ability to scrutinise their provider’s performance, identify areas for improvement and influence future delivery*”
- 1.2 In response to these regulations Croydon Council, in partnership with its tenants developed a framework for tenant scrutiny. This included the establishment of and recruitment to, a tenant scrutiny panel. During early 2012 the panel members received a range of training to prepare them to conduct effective scrutiny exercises and there is a programme of on-going training to enhance skills and knowledge.
- 1.3 The panel had expressed an early interest in scrutinising the repairs service following the appointment of Axis in 2013 as the sole contractor. However, due to the short time Axis had been in operation, the panel agreed to wait in order to give the new contractor a chance to settle into their service provision before conducting a scrutiny exercise of their operations.
- 1.4 At a meeting in January 2017, contact centre reports (see Fig.1) showed that the responsive repairs service was the most complained about service. This is in line with other local authorities and registered social landlords. Analysis of the nature of the complaints showed that a high number of them related to ‘service failures’ by Axis, mainly around work not being completed and a lack of follow up and feedback to the customer.

Fig 1.

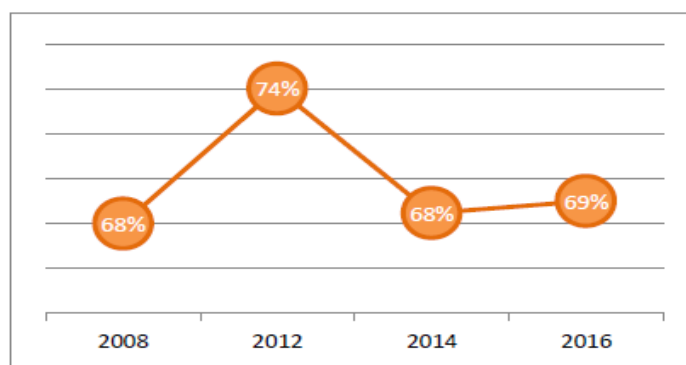
2.4 Complaints by service area as a percentage of total housing complaints received.



- 1.5 Results from the survey of tenants and residents (STAR) (see Fig. 2) showed a fall in satisfaction levels with the repairs service from 74% in 2012 to 68% in 2014 and only a 1% improvement to 69% in 2016.

Fig. 2

Figure 5.2: Change in satisfaction with the repairs and maintenance service over time



- 1.6 As a result, the panel unanimously agreed that, due to the high number of complaints received from residents – an increase of 36%, as evidenced in consecutive quarterly complaints reports and STAR survey, it would conduct a scrutiny exercise on the responsive repairs service. However, it was felt that scrutinising the entire repairs service would be impractical. The panel therefore agreed that the focus of this exercise would be on the end to end process from reporting a repair through to completion and post inspection of the job.
- 1.7 The Panel agreed to assess the responsive repairs process against key areas of enquiry, as shown below.
- What repairs information is provided by the council and how is it communicated to residents?
 - How easy is it to access the service in order to report a repair?
 - Delivery of service – performance targets, response times, keeping appointments, call centres.
 - Customer care – how are customers treated, behaviour of operatives?
 - Are service users satisfied with the responsive repairs service – satisfaction levels and complaints, post inspections?

- 1.8 The panel also agreed, where possible and relevant, to use responsive repairs benchmarking data from other similar housing providers.
- 1.9 This report details the findings and recommendations of this scrutiny exercise, which took place between January 2017 and November 2017.

2. SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

2.1 As part of their investigations, the Panel met with the following:

- Lorraine Smout, Head of Responsive Repairs, Croydon Council
- Ian Rhodes, Divisional Manager, Axis
- Jennifer Scott, Customer Service Delivery Manager, Axis

2.2 Lorraine Smout attended a scrutiny panel meeting in February 2017 and gave panel members an overview of the repairs service. She made suggestions regarding the scope of the scrutiny exercise and subsequently provided a variety of background information for the panel to review.

2.3 Ian Rhodes attended a scrutiny panel meeting on 20 April 2017 and gave the panel an overview of operations at Axis as well as discussing arrangements for panel members to visit the Axis offices and which officers the panel wished to interview. He later sent job descriptions for various key staff members for the panel to review.

2.4 The panel conducted a desktop review of all the information provided by Lorraine Smout (Croydon council):

- Repairs Guide for Tenants
- Performance monitoring – quarter 3 2016/17
- An overview of the Responsive Repairs service
- Complaints analysis reports – Q1, 2, & 3 2016/17
- Corporate Social Responsibility update
- Key Performance Indicators summary Q2 October 2016
- Organisational and operational charts
- A range of repairs guides for tenants including conditions of tenancy/flexible tenancy and a leaflet called 'Tenant Repairs Responsibilities', damp & condensation guides, etc
- Volume 3 section 6 of the Key Performance Indicators handbook.

Ian Rhodes (Axis) - provided the following:

- Job descriptions for Axis staff
- Organisational and operational charts

- 2.5 In addition the printed material provided, the panel reviewed repairs information on the council's website, including attempting to navigate the repairs web pages in order to report a repair online.
- 2.6 Panel members expressed a desire to visit the Axis offices in order to gain an insight into the daily operations there. A visit was organised for 24 May 2017. Panel members were welcomed by Ian Rhodes and Jennifer Scott who navigated them through a day of planned activities that included attending a weekly 'Toolbox Talk' – a meeting with management and field operatives where issues regarding health and safety and various aspects of their jobs are discussed; a session in the customer services centre meeting the customer services advisors and observing customer contact; the customer experience team, meeting the resident liaison officers; and team training. Throughout the day, panel members were given the opportunity to ask questions and seek further clarification regarding what they had witnessed and been told.
- 2.7 Panel members returned to Axis' offices early in August 2017 and interviewed the following Axis staff members:
- Customer Services manager
 - Handyperson
 - Electrician
 - Plumber
 - Resident Liaison Officer
 - Senior supervisor
 - 2 x Senior Customer Services Advisor
 - Scheduler
- 2.8 The following Croydon council staff were also interviewed at Bernard Weatherill House:
- Members and Residents Services Manager
 - Senior Repairs Inspector
 - Repairs Co-ordinator
- 2.9 Several resident focus group sessions were held – one at Shrublands, one at Bernard Weatherill House and one at a sheltered block. In total 26 residents attended and were asked a series of questions agreed by the panel relating to their responsive repairs experience.

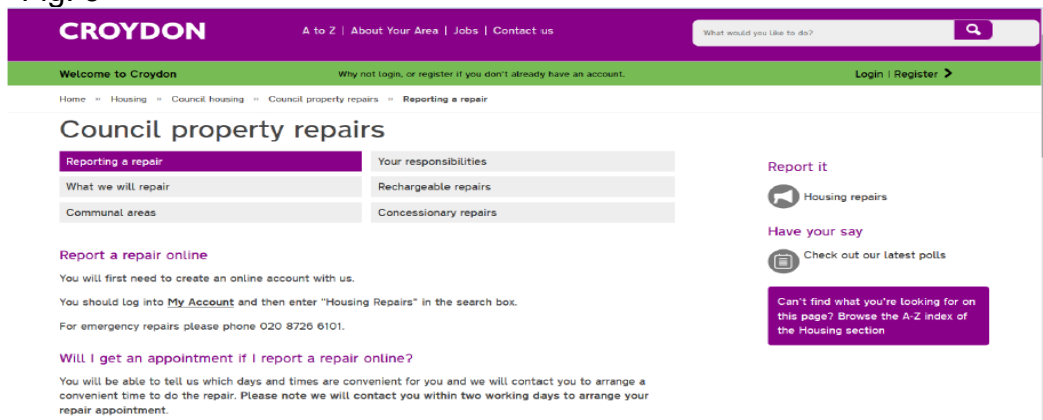
3 FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS

- 3.1.0 What repairs information is provided by the council and how is it communicated to residents?

- 3.1.1 The panel felt that there was a general lack of availability of printed repairs information for residents. The council as a whole is working towards providing a higher proportion of information online and reducing the amount of printed communication. However, the panel feel that the move to reduce the availability of printed information and advice about housing services does not meet the needs of the large numbers of council residents who are not yet fully online.
- 3.1.2 Panel members reviewed the Repairs Guide for tenants which is issued at sign up but is not otherwise readily available in hard copy. Any updates to the guide are not communicated to existing residents. However, the most recent version of the guide is available for download from the repairs pages of the council's website. Axis staff also send electronic versions of the guide out to customers to remind/inform them of their responsibilities as tenants and what Axis can and can't do in compliance with the repairs guide.
- 3.1.3 It was agreed that the Repairs Guide is well put together, easy to read, visually interesting and informative. The booklet contains all the relevant information for residents to report a repair as well as their responsibilities and those of the council. The guide is available in 4 different languages. However, it did not appear to be available in larger print format for those with visual impairment.
- 3.1.4 The panel felt that the emergency numbers should appear earlier on the publication, instead of on page 14 and that this could possibly lead to fewer calls being made that were not really emergencies. It was also felt that the priority timescales could be better explained to make it clearer, with the possible inclusion of examples of the types of repair for guidance.
- 3.1.5 Hard copies of the damp and condensation guides were reviewed. Again they found that guides were well designed, easy to read, informative and clearly written in plain English. These guides were also available in 4 different languages. The guides have not changed much over time and were said to be expensive to produce, hence not being widely available in hard copy outside of tenancy sign ups.
- 3.1.6 The panel examined the repairs pages on the council's website and made comparisons with other social housing providers such as Lambeth, Southwark, Sutton and Amicus Horizon/Optivo.
- 3.1.7 The website and repairs pages were easily accessible when searched from the Google home page with clear links to reporting a repair from Croydon council's homepage. However, from Croydon's homepage, a repair could not be reported without setting up a 'My Account' and logging into the account. In April 2017 when the review was conducted, clicking on 'reporting a repair' or the 'Report it' icon only brought up information and links relating to logging into or setting up an online account and reporting the repair in this way, along with the emergency repairs telephone number and repair timeslots. There were 6 categories on the council property repairs page (see Fig. 3):
- Reporting a repair
 - What we will repair
 - Communal areas

- Your responsibilities
- Rechargeable repairs
- Concessionary repairs

Fig. 3

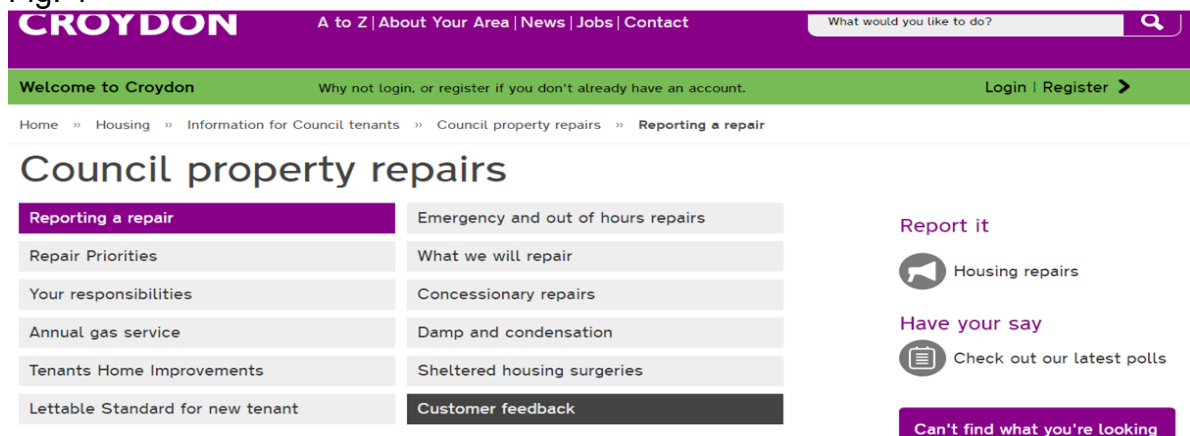


It was felt that some of the drop-down menus were not comprehensive enough and that they pages were a little clumsy to navigate.

3.1.8 When the same search was carried out in October 2017, clicking on the same link brought up more detailed information on ways to report a repair than before ie. Online by setting up My Account, by phone via the contact centre, or in person by visiting Access Croydon. The categories listed had been changed to:

- Reporting a repair
- Repair Priorities
- Emergency and out of hours repairs
- What we will repair
- Your responsibilities
- Concessionary repairs
- Annual gas service
- Tenant Home Improvements
- Lettable standard for new tenants
- Damp and condensation
- Sheltered housing surgeries
- Customer feedback

Fig. 4



The page also contained information regarding the timeslots that could be requested for booking general repairs, gas repairs, emergency repairs and specialist repairs. General repairs were in two hour timeslots from 8am to 6pm; gas and specialist repairs were either morning or afternoon; and emergency repairs were to be done within 2 hours (Fig 5).

Fig. 5

Will you get an appointment if you report a repair online?

Appointments are Monday to Friday. You will be able to tell us which days and times are convenient for you. Please note we will contact you within two working days to arrange your repair appointment.

General repair time slots:

- 8am-10am
- 10am-12pm
- 12pm-2pm
- 2pm-4pm
- 4pm-6pm

Gas repair time slots:

- 8am to 1pm
- 12pm to 5pm

Specialist repairs time slots, such as lift:

- 8am to 1pm
- 12pm to 5pm

Emergency or urgent repairs:

Appointments do not apply, these will be attended to within 2 and 24 hours but only to make the property safe.

There were also instructions to customers regarding cancelling a booked appointment, advising customers to give as much notice as possible in order for the appointment to be re-allocated to avoid wasted time for operatives.

3.1.9 The information was much clearer and addressed the issues raised by the panel earlier on in the scrutiny exercise such as how people without access to the internet or who may not be very confident in navigating their way around a website, or who may have visual/hearing impairment would go about reporting a repair.

3.1.10 The repairs web pages have improved vastly since the previous year when they had attempted to navigate them. The repairs pages continue to evolve and improve, with more comprehensive information and user friendly navigation. A particular feature that the panel tested and approved of was the 'browse aloud' feature activated by clicking on the icon. This function allowed

the user to 'listen' to the page as it was read out by a pre-recorded voice which could be translated into a wide range of languages using the translate function. There were also text magnifier and simplify options (see Fig. 6).

Fig. 6



- 3.1.11 Panel members felt that any updates and notifications on the website should be communicated to relevant teams within the council in order to raise awareness of the improvements or changes to services and allow promotion of the services accordingly.
- 3.1.12 Croydon's web pages were comparable to those of Southwark council and Amicus Horizon/Optivo in terms of clarity of design, ease of navigation and content. However, Southwark's site also included a series of 'Fix it at Home' videos which showed residents how to carry out simple repairs for themselves. The panel thought this was a positive feature. Both Southwark and Amicus had the facility to track a repair once reported. Amicus Horizon/Optivo had a homeowner's section that the panel thought useful. The Sutton site had good links giving names and responsibilities regarding repairs along with helpful icons for all types of repairs. Repairs could also be reported without having My Account. Lambeth council's site was non-operational at the time of review and therefore could not be compared at that time.
- 3.1.13 Panel members were aware that the council had a mobile app, but this currently can't be used to report repairs in the home. This is seen as a lost opportunity.

| Recommendations | |
|-----------------|--|
| 1.1 | (3.1.2) Managers to consider sending any updates to the Repairs Guide out to residents along with their annual rent statements |
| 1.2 | (3.1.4) When the Repairs Guide for Residents is next revised or updated, Managers to consider moving the emergency numbers and repairs priority timescales closer to the front of the publication. |
| 1.3 | (3.1.4) Managers ensure that priority timescales are fully explained and, where possible, examples of the type of repair is given for clarification. |
| 1.4 | (3.1.11) Managers to ensure that updates/notifications on the web pages are sent to other relevant Croydon council and Axis teams to alert them of any changes or service improvements. |

- | | |
|-----|---|
| 1.5 | (3.1.12) Managers to consider the inclusion of items of good practice from the websites of other housing providers such as the Fix it at Home videos and the Track Your Repair functions on the Southwark and Amicus Horizon/Optivo websites. |
| 1.6 | (3.1.13) Managers to consider extending the use of the mobile app to reporting non-urgent repairs. |

3.2.0 How easy is it to access the service and report a repair?

- 3.2.1 This area of enquiry is to broadly determine whether customers are able to access the responsive repairs service with ease and report their repair efficiently and accurately. Is the service user-friendly? Can all residents report their repair in the manner that suits them as and when their repair occurs?
- 3.2.2 The panel looked at the various ways that repairs could be reported. Details of how to report a repair are clearly set out on page 12 of the Repairs Guide for tenants as well as on the repairs pages of the website. The contact phone number, email address for Axis and Croydon's website address are all listed in the repairs guide. Residents are also given the option to come into Access Croydon to report their repair.
- 3.2.3 There was a mixed response from the focus groups in relation to their experience of reporting a repair. Some of the focus group members reported that they had no problems accessing the service. Axis contact centre staff were said to be polite and efficient and their call was handled professionally. However, others focus group members listed a range of issues with even just getting through on the phone to make the report and that their customer experience depended on the operative they were speaking to at the time.
- 3.2.4 Feedback from focus groups regarding reporting a repair by phone revealed that the repairs service was easily accessible by phone. The Axis contact numbers are readily available and repairs can be reported 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Telephone response times were now much quicker and Axis contact centre operatives were on the whole friendly, helpful and pleasant to talk to. Calls were reportedly handled in a professional manner and it was easy to get an appointment for a repair. Operatives have called back when they have said they would. When calling out of office hours, using the main council number - 0208 720 6000, a recorded message directs the caller to the Croydon council website to register for My Account and report the repair in this way, or to select option 3 if it is an emergency. The emergency call was answered promptly.
- 3.2.5 Some focus group members, however, reported being put on hold and long waiting times on the phone, particularly in the early days of the Axis contract. It was also flagged up that operatives are not always patient when someone has speech or language difficulties or who do not have English as a first language. A few reported that Axis call centre operatives can sometimes be

rude when answering calls and that sometimes the operative did not seem to have the required repairs knowledge for accurate and efficient diagnosis and recording of repairs, which often led to delays in getting the correct works done. Other focus group members felt that the level of service received depended on the officer dealing with the call, as some officers were said to go the 'extra mile' and others 'couldn't care less'.

- 3.2.6 Panel members and focus group members reported that they had encountered difficulties with reporting repairs online via the council website. Navigation and drop down menus were reportedly not comprehensive and some items such as lights in the car park and other communal repairs were not listed. Other residents from the focus groups reported that there were times when the website was not available/accessible, while others reported not being able to complete the process, set up their My Account and get online.
- 3.2.7 A few focus group members also reported that whenever they report a repair via email or online, it takes some time for the repair to get done and for anyone to get back to them with feedback or an appointment. One resident reported that there is approximately a 5 day delay when repairs are emailed. Another resident mentioned that they bypass the repairs reporting system altogether, and simply send an email to their Tenancy officer for them to report the repair on their behalf to avoid any delays or problems.
- 3.2.8 On the whole, residents from the sheltered housing focus group reported a much better customer experience when reporting and getting repairs done. The Handyman service has been well received by sheltered block residents and this has contributed to higher levels of satisfaction and repairs being picked up and completed quickly in these blocks. The panel felt that this was an excellent service.
- 3.2.9 There appeared to be a general lack of clarity amongst focus group members on how to report a communal repair, such as lights in the car park.
- 3.2.10 There were no statistics relating to repairs reported from Access Croydon, as walk-in customers are directed to the phones and the 6101 extension number to report their repairs. These calls are handled in the same way as any other repairs call.

Recommendations

- 2.1 (3.2.5) Axis managers to organise additional training for contact centre staff regarding customer services, diversity/language issues, call handling and accurate logging of repairs to ensure consistent service delivery.
- 2.2 (3.2.6) Croydon council managers to review website to address ease of access issues, navigation, drop down menus, etc. Also to consider allowing repairs to be reported without first having to set up a My Account.

- 2.3 (3.2.7) Managers to address issues regarding reporting repairs via email, ie quicker pick up of emails and feedback of actions to customers to confirm that repair has been received and acted upon.
- 2.4 (3.2.9) Need more comprehensive drop down menu options and clearer instructions on how to report a communal repair online.

3.3.0 Delivery of Service

- 3.3.1 This area of enquiry looks at the delivery of the responsive repairs service particularly around performance targets, response times, keeping appointments, quality of work and getting it right first time.
- 3.3.2 The panel looked at the Key Performance Indicator (KPI) figures during their desktop review. Early on in the contract, customer satisfaction figures were well below the target of 88%*(see Fig 7).

Fig.7

Quarterly Councillors KPI Report Year End 14/15, 15/16 and 16/17 to date Appendix 1

| No | KPI | Reporting frequency | Target | 2014-15 Year End results | 2015-16 Year End Results | Quarter 1 16/17 | Quarter 2 16/17 |
|-----|--|---------------------|--------|--------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| R1 | Customer satisfaction - Repairs | Monthly | 88% | 74.06% | 77.71% | 86.5% | 88.8% |
| R2 | Quality defects/recalls | Monthly | 1% | 1.07% | 2.23% | 2.65% | 5.61% |
| R3 | Number of repairs completed on 1st visit | Monthly | 90% | 86.60% | 93.4% | 96.7% | 95.33% |
| R4a | Repair completion times | | | | | | |
| | Priority 0 & 00 (2 hours) | | 100% | 97.90% | 97.85% | 97.7% | 97.40% |
| | Priority 1 (24 hours) | | 100% | 98.66% | 99.59% | 99.7% | 96.07% |
| | Priority 2 (3 days) | | 98% | 93.10% | 98.6% | 99% | 80.21% |
| | Priority 15 (15 working days) | | 97% | 87.92% | 97.94% | 98.9% | 91.20% |
| | Priority 16 (60 working days) | | 99% | 95.69% | 93.47% | 92.4% | 72.16% |

However, even though the target is still not being fully met, there has been a gradual rise in customer satisfaction levels in successive years from 2014 to present where it currently stands at 87.4% (Fig. 8).

Fig. 8

2017-18 KPI Summary

| No | KPI | Reporting frequency | Target | Year End Results 16/17 | Quarter 1 17/18 | Quarter 2 17/18 | Quarter 3 17/18 |
|-----|--|---------------------|--------|------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| R1 | Customer satisfaction - Repairs | Monthly | 89% | 86.80% | 86.73% | 87.4% | |
| R2 | Jobs passing post inspection | Monthly | 95% | 90.06% | 87.18% | 89.69% | |
| R3 | Number of repairs completed on 1st visit | Monthly | 90% | 93.87% | 93.08% | 93.17% | |
| R4a | Repair completion times | | | | | | |
| | Priority 0 & 00 (2 hours) | | 100% | 99.00% | 100% | 100% | |
| | Priority 1 (24 hours) | | 99% | 99.77% | 100% | 100% | |
| | Priority 2 (3 days) | | 98% | 91.06% | 80.49% | 92.92% | |
| | Priority 15 (15 working days) | | 99% | 98.42% | 99.20% | 99.52% | |
| | Priority 16 (60 working days) | | 100% | 87.94% | 98.12% | 98.26% | |

- 3.3.3 The figures for the number of repairs being completed on the first visit has shown a significant increase from 86.6% back in 2014/15 (Fig. 7) to exceeding targets at 93.87 at the end of 2016/17. Latest figures show a fall in the figures to 93.17% (Fig. 8). Despite exceeding the target of 90%, focus group members expressed a high level of dissatisfaction with jobs not being completed on the first visit and a lack of communication or feedback regarding when the repair would be followed up and completed.
- 3.3.4 The year end performance figures (Fig. 8) for priority completion times show that Axis are very close to or meeting their targets for Priority 0 (2 hours), Priority 1 (24 hours) and Priority 15 (15 working days) repairs. However, there appears to be delay issues with Priority 2 (2 working days) and Priority 16 (60 working days). Focus groups reflected that residents were unhappy with delays in getting works done. They also felt that there needed to be more clarity on what jobs fall within the different priority categories.
- 3.3.5 In 2016/17 there were 168 complaints received in relation to Axis, which represented a 12% increase on the previous year's figures (see Fig. 9). These complaints related to work not being completed and a lack of feedback and follow up. Residents in the focus groups felt that there is not enough feedback from operatives before they leave an incomplete job and that there was great difficulty in getting follow up work done once the operative left the property. They also reported delays in having inspectors come out to do surveys of the proposed works. Residents from the sheltered block focus group corroborated this view, despite having the handyman service at their disposal.

Fig. 9

Complaints Analysis 2015/16 and 2016/17

Appendix 2

| | 1 st Qtr 2015/16 | 2 nd Qtr 2015/16 | 3 rd Qtr 2015/16 | 4 th Qtr 2015/16 | 1 st Qtr 2016/17 | 2 nd Qtr 2016/17 | 3 rd Qtr 2016/17 | 4 th Qtr 2016/17 |
|--|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Missed or late appointment - contractor | 1 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 2 | 0 | 3 | 1 |
| Work not completed by contractor – lack of feedback or follow up | 12 | 14 | 13 | 26 | 16 | 23 | 13 | 16 |
| Compliments | 13 | 4 | 7 | 13 | 6 | 9 | 7 | 13 |
| Number of jobs completed in period | 12,432 | 12,909 | 15,706 | 15,756 | 12,349 | 11,214 | 14,251 | 13,422 |
| Total Axis | 34 | 26 | 29 | 61 | 39 | 36 | 41 | 52 |
| Axis complaints as a percentage of jobs completed in the period <i>Target is not exceeding 0.4%</i> | 0.27% | 0.20% | 0.18% | 0.39% | 0.31% | 0.32% | 0.29% | 0.39% |
| % of 16,031 households making complaints | 0.21% | 0.16% | 0.18% | 0.38% | 0.24% | 0.22% | 0.26% | 0.32% |

- 3.3.6 Some focus group residents also reported that operatives sometimes do not turn up for appointments that have been made. Axis and Croydon are currently working jointly to reduce the level of dissatisfaction from customers. There is now a continuous service improvement plan that senior staff at Axis and Croydon meet regularly to address, which has contributed to a reduction in the number of complaints and improved customer satisfaction.

3.3.7 Axis have now introduced a text messaging service in an effort to improve customer satisfaction. Field operatives now have PDA's to facilitate swift movement of information between themselves and the office in relation to completion of jobs. When an operative sends a completed job through to the office using their PDA, this generates an immediate text message to the customer, if they have provided a mobile number. The short text message survey asks the customer to respond 'yes' or 'no' to the question of whether they are satisfied with the job that has just been completed. If they reply 'no', the Resident Liaison Officer is alerted and will call the customer to discuss how they can make things right. If necessary, the Resident Liaison Officer will make an appointment to go out and visit the resident or an operative will re-visit. This service ultimately reduces the need for formal complaints and lengthy investigations. This new system is cited by both Croydon and Axis staff as a possible reason for the reduction in formal complaints.

Panel members raised concerns regarding whether there was a real reduction in the level of complaints, or whether they were just not being logged as formal complaints because of the intervention of the Resident Liaison Officers.

3.3.8 Management and staff interviewed reported that the development and implementation of a joint service improvement action plan has also served to reduce complaints and improve service delivery. The action plan is reviewed monthly and a trend analysis conducted to look at how many complaints there are, what is the nature of the complaints and what can be done to reduce the level of complaints. There are also regular joint formal and informal management meetings to review performance figures.

3.3.9 There were a number of instances during the scrutiny exercise where issues were raised regarding the quality of the work done once the operative attended the property. Focus group and various staff members who were interviewed commented on the poor quality of some of the works that were carried out. There was a suggestion that some of the operatives were not fully trained and competent in their field and that this was reflected in the standard of their work. Quality of work was highlighted as an area for improvement by all three focus groups.

3.3.10 Interviews with field operatives revealed that they are given an initial 50 minute appointment to go in and assess the works that need to be done. If they have the correct tools and materials in their van and the work can be done within 50 minutes, then they carry out the job. If the job can't be done within 50 minutes, they then have to contact the schedulers and make another appointment to complete the works. Operatives interviewed felt that 50 minutes was not enough time for a first time fix. This was corroborated by the supervisor and repairs inspector.

3.3.11 Operatives felt that communication between residents and the Axis office about jobs needed to be improved. In instances where the job could not be completed on the first 50 minute visit, the resident may have taken time off work thinking that the job would be done there and then and often it can't be done. They are disappointed and frustrated when they learn that another

appointment may need to be made, delaying the repair and requiring further time off work for the customer.

- 3.3.12 An Operative gave an example of an instance when they have arrived at a job on what they thought was an initial 50 minute appointment to assess what works were needed. Once there, they found out from the customer that another operative had already been out on a previous appointment to carry out the initial assessment. The customer was unhappy because they were under the impression that the current operative had come to carry out the job. Another appointment would then had to be made via the schedulers and, where necessary, parts ordered for the job. This causes inconvenience for the customer and further delays in completing the job.
- 3.3.13 During staff interviews, panel members learned that jobs are allocated to operatives one by one. So an operative is not given a new job until they complete the previous one. Management justification is that allocating jobs in this way relieves pressure on operatives to complete jobs quickly and so they stay on a specific job until the repair is done. However all operatives interviewed, as well as other staff members with a technical background or extensive experience, felt that this was not the most efficient way.
- 3.3.14 Operatives reported that when jobs are allocated one by one, they are unable to plan their day logistically and consequently find themselves driving all over the borough during their working day, which wastes time and resources. When they have sight of all of their jobs for the day, they can organise them in a logistically efficient way. They can also organise their tools and equipment needed to execute the jobs. For example, if the operative needs to go to a supplier for a job, they may have to go back to the same place later on in the day for a subsequent job. It would save a lot of time and effort, if it all the supplies could be purchased in one visit. Having sight of all jobs for the day, in their opinion, helps them to plan more efficiently.
- 3.3.15 One operative reported that during the course of his work he may have commercial waste to get rid of. He has suggested to his supervisor that they get a skip and keep it at the depot in Shrublands to facilitate trade waste disposal by the operatives. Despite numerous requests, he reports that this has still not happened. It reportedly costs £22 each time the operative goes to dispose of the waste in his small van. The operative felt that a skip would be more cost effective.

Operatives also report that it can be difficult to collect tools to complete jobs depending on the location of the job. There are also issues around restocking their vans.

- 3.3.16 Staff morale at Axis was reportedly low earlier on in the contract. Management have since implemented motivational training with staff in the customer services centre along with a system of incentives and targets for staff to work towards. The 'One Team' training programme was delivered jointly by Croydon and Axis. Management reported that the training has brought about an improvement in morale levels.

- 3.3.17 Field operatives also report that morale was low in the early days of the contract. Staff who transferred over from Croydon were told their jobs were 'at risk' by management. This initial uncertainty negatively affected morale. The field operatives did not specifically mention any motivational training, but attributed their improved morale to the managerial skills and support of the Operations Manager.
- 3.3.18 Operatives reported that they have a fixed number of callouts – 9, but that they rarely finish all of their jobs. Perhaps 7 – 8 of these are completed in one day. The operative works 9 hours a day and stated that there is no real provision for lunch breaks. The operative in question mentioned taking a quick break and only being able to complete 7 – 8 jobs instead of the required 9.
- 3.3.19 When panel members visited Axis' offices, there were a number of staff vacancies. Some were reportedly due to maternity and others because of leave. However, throughout the staff interviews, staff shortages, vacancies and staff turnover were highlighted as having a negative effect on service delivery. For example, at the time of our visit and interviews there was a shortage of plasterers and consequently there was a 4 – 5 week wait for plastering appointments. The complaint report for quarter 2 2017/18* shows an increase in complaints and attributes this to lapses in service delivery due to staffing issues. The report also mentions that Axis were unable to recruit to certain vacant posts at that time.
- 3.3.20 Office staff and field operatives all felt that they would be better able to deliver an efficient and responsive service if there were more staff to do the work. However, most staff report that working conditions and service delivery has improved vastly within the last 12 months. This is due mainly to a commitment to customer services, close partnership working with Croydon council repairs team, improved communication with residents, ongoing staff training and support and continual service improvement.
- 3.3.21 Customer services officers felt that relocating to the Axis office greatly improved the service that they are able to provide. There is less pressure to answer calls and the ability to focus on repairs calls rather than being part of a generic call centre, allows them to build up their experience and knowledge of the service and better diagnose the problems when customers call in to report repairs. They are now properly trained and better placed to get support from Axis staff in diagnosing and logging repairs, especially in relation to those with language difficulties or who do not have English as a first language.
- 3.3.22 The system of having to go through the schedulers to speak to the operatives is one that customer services officers find frustrating. They reported during their interviews that it makes the process more bureaucratic as it adds another layer. Many customers call using their mobile phones and if they need an immediate answer and the contact centre is busy, they are kept on hold while the customer services officer contacts the schedulers. This wastes the customer's mobile minutes. Previously, a call could be made directly to the operatives.

- 3.3.23 There were also reports from interviewed staff of time being wasted trying to establish whether a job is PPP (priced per property) or not. Panel members were informed that there had been a limited roll-out of training on PPP for staff and operatives leading to confusion over which jobs are included and those that are not. Consequently, Axis had inadvertently paid for jobs that were excluded from the PPP scheme for the past 4 years.
- 3.3.24 There were issues regarding diagnosing problem repairs. Not all staff are experienced or trained enough to be able to diagnose a problem on the first visit. Supervisors were reportedly slow to escalate issues, causing costs to rise as multiple operatives are sent out to inspect the same repair. It was felt that supervisors are sometimes slow to escalate problems. In the meantime, the customer still has not had the work done to remedy the problem.
- 3.3.25 Some residents in the focus groups expressed the desire for more female operatives who could do jobs for women who were vulnerable or lived alone and who may not feel comfortable letting a male operative into their home. Axis had 3 female apprentices when panel members visited their offices in May 2017.

Recommendations

- 3.1 (3.3.2) Service managers from Croydon council and Axis to consult with residents and continue to improve service delivery in order to reduce complaints and improve customer satisfaction levels.
- 3.2 (3.3.3/5/9) Where repairs cannot be completed on the first visit, relevant managers to ensure that operatives and staff communicate openly and honestly with residents regarding completion timescales.
- 3.3 (3.3.4) Managers to continue to work towards meeting targets for priority timescales for *all* repairs, not just the high priority ones. Resident's expectations are to be managed by giving realistic information regarding job priority and completion times of their repairs.
- 3.4 (3.3.7 & 3.3.16) Axis managers to endeavour to recruit, train and retain high quality operatives who are able execute their work to a high standard with a view to avoiding recalls and customer dissatisfaction. Managers to continue to carry out quality checks on works done.
- 3.5 (3.3.9) Axis managers to improve communication between residents and scheduling staff to avoid multiple operatives turning up at properties to conduct the same assessment. Schedulers to give residents a clear idea of the process ie 50 minute initial assessment with a possible follow-up appointment where necessary.
- 3.6 (3.3.10) Managers to review the 50 minute timeslots for first appointments to allow enough time for a good quality repair to be executed on the first visit.

- 3.7 (3.3.10 – 18) Managers to examine working practices to ensure efficiency savings in terms of planning and routing of types of jobs, jobs themselves and locations. Consider whether there is scope to recruit more tradesmen within current Axis budget allocations.
- 3.8 (3.3.15) Axis managers to consider re-opening currently closed depots and the provision of a skip for disposal of trade waste by operatives.
- 3.9 (3.3.17) Axis managers to review the relationships between customer service staff, operatives and schedulers and consider motivational training and team building across the organisation to foster better working relationships between all teams.
- 3.10 (3.3.22) Managers to consider implementing a virtual queuing system where customers are not kept holding on the phone. Some local authorities have a system where customers' place is held in the queue and subsequently called back by an officer.
- 3.11 (3.3.23) Managers to recruit and train more female field operatives who could be specifically requested in instances where female residents who live alone, are vulnerable or for cultural reasons felt safer/more comfortable with a female entering their home to carry out repairs.

3.4.0 Customer care – how are customers treated, behaviour of operatives?

- 3.4.1 It was reported by staff in interviews that prior to year 3 of the contract, Axis had no resources in service improvement. They now reportedly have the personnel, systems and motivation to look into complaints and take steps towards resolving the issues contained in them. The resulting improvements to services is reflected in the falling complaints figures.
- 3.4.2 In the past year, Axis have made changes to personnel and procedures that have resulted in huge service improvement. A dedicated customer services delivery manager was recruited in November 2016, who developed the resident liaison officer role and now manages the customer service centre that handles all repair calls that come through, the customer experience team which includes resident liaison, complaints, text message service and the handy person service for older people. Considerable emphasis is now being placed on customer care. All staff interviewed reported positive changes and improvements to working practices and service delivery.
- 3.4.3 The majority of customers interviewed in the focus groups report a good level of customer care from Axis. Contact centre staff are reported to be polite, friendly, professional, respectful and helpful. There were also a few reports from focus group members that some phone operatives can be rude, condescending and impatient.
- 3.4.4 Focus groups reported that field operatives were polite, respectful and helpful in cases where customers were more vulnerable. On the whole, they got on

with the job and got the job done. Identity badges were always worn and presented to customers upon arrival and resident report that operatives clean up before they leave. There was one report from a focus group member that operatives would not remove their shoes when requested. However, having attended a Toolbox Talk, panel members were aware that operatives were specifically told *not* to remove their protective footwear in residents' homes for health and safety reasons. They were advised to wear protective shoe coverings to protect resident's floors/carpets.

- 3.4.5 Residents from the sheltered block focus group were very happy with the Handyman service and felt that they received good customer care. Results from the Star survey show that older customers are more satisfied with the repair service that they receive.
- 3.4.6 Operatives felt that jobs needed to be booked quicker in order to improve turnaround time and reduce customer waiting times. As front line officers, they are often on the receiving end of resident's frustrations when jobs do not go according to plan and are delayed. They report feeling helpless when customers become emotional or frustrated with the delays. This is particularly true when customers have had to take time off work to be home to give access to contractors. Operatives feel as there is a lack of empathy and that customers' feelings are not considered.
- 3.4.7 One staff member reported during their interview that early on in the contract, Axis had poor onsite supervision. This was said to be because they lacked experience with social housing stock. They were not mindful of social housing issues and lacked empathy with social housing tenants. Now their staff are better trained and the company as a whole acknowledges social housing issues such as those relating to damp and condensation eg cultural issues, fuel poverty, lifestyle issues, overcrowding, too much furniture, etc. Axis no longer give out general advice on damp and condensation but instead deal with each case individually and resolve the issue accordingly eg. Installing window vents, insulation, etc. There is now better training and supervision of staff at Axis.

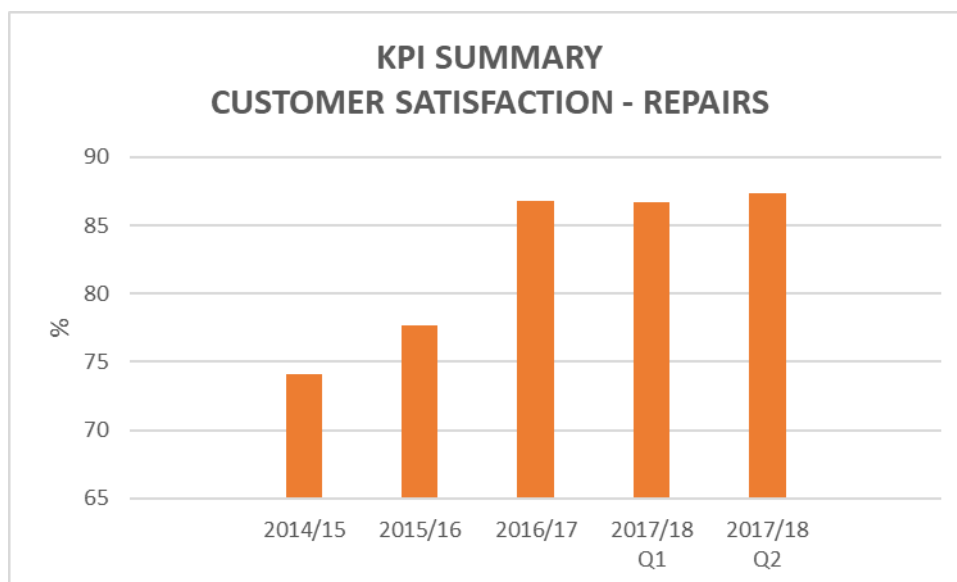
Recommendations

- 4.1 (3.4.6) Managers to review the process for following up on jobs that can't be done on the first visit in order to reduce the levels of dissatisfaction and inconvenience to the customer.
- 4.2 (3.4.7) Managers to ensure a programme of ongoing training and supervision is rolled out to all staff, that is relevant to their job.

3.5.0 Are service users satisfied with the responsive repairs service?

- 3.5.1 Overall satisfaction levels with repairs has been steadily increasing from 74.06% at the end of 2014/15 to 87.4% at the end of quarter 2 2017/18 (Fig.10). Panel members agreed that the low satisfaction levels at the start of the Axis contract could be attributed to the new contractors bedding into their service provision.

Fig. 10



Recommendation

- 5.1 Managers to continue to consult with residents and staff on ways to improve service delivery.

3.6.0 ADDITIONAL FINDINGS

- 3.6.1 Damp related issues and lack of follow up and communication on appointments continue to be major a source of complaints. However, the service has reportedly shown considerable improvement in the last 12 months
- 3.6.2 There continues to be a shortage of good wet trades' operative such as plasterers and bricklayers.
- 3.6.3 Axis operatives are now being encouraged to be more vigilant around safeguarding issues and report any issues that they may notice when they enter resident's homes that may lead to involvement of other agencies or services such as social services, tenancy team, anti-social behaviour, mental health services, the police, etc.

- 3.6.4 All staff interviewed at Croydon had many years' experience and had been in their roles for some time. Newly recruited Axis staff were identified as not having the necessary experience and being in need of further training to enable them to execute their jobs more effectively/efficiently.
- 3.6.5 After the initial settling down period, Croydon council and Axis are working jointly to improve service delivery and the customer experience. There are regular joint management meetings to look at performance indicators and service improvement issues.
- 3.6.6 Staff morale was said to be high both at Croydon and Axis offices, however it varied depending on who was being interviewed. Some officers appeared to be happier in their roles than others.
- 3.6.7 Across the board, Axis and Croydon staff cite poor communication, particularly when jobs could not be completed on the first visit, as one of the major issues with the responsive repairs service. It is felt that if this is improved, then it paves the way for service improvement.

Recommendations

- 6.1 (3.6.4) Axis managers to ensure that newly recruited staff undergo a training needs assessment.
- 6.2 (3.6.7) The council and Axis to explore ways of improving communication with residents in instances where jobs cannot be completed on the first visit and give realistic timescales for completion of outstanding works.

4.0 CONCLUSIONS & NEXT STEPS

- 4.1 The Panel are pleased to report that the majority of staff responded positively to the review, were open and candid in their replies and appeared willing to consider ways to improve the way the responsive repairs service is delivered to its' customers.
- 4.2 Overall the panel found the service area to be improving after the initial bedding in problems that have given rise to numerous customer complaints and declining satisfaction levels. Management at Axis and Croydon have worked closely together to implement a number of personnel and procedural changes that have led to noticeable service improvements in the past 12 months.
- 4.3 It is the intention of the Panel that this report and the recommendations contained within it will be presented to senior managers for their comments prior to a final Action Plan being developed, detailing the actions agreed by management for implementation in the future.
- 4.4 The implementation of the action plan will be monitored.

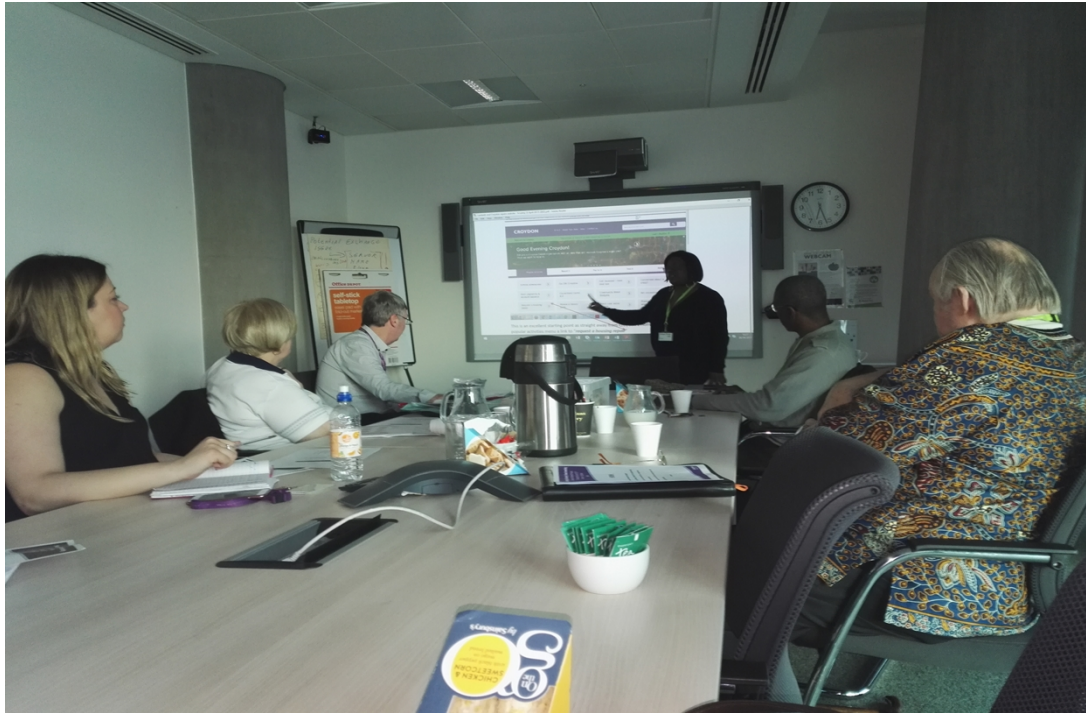
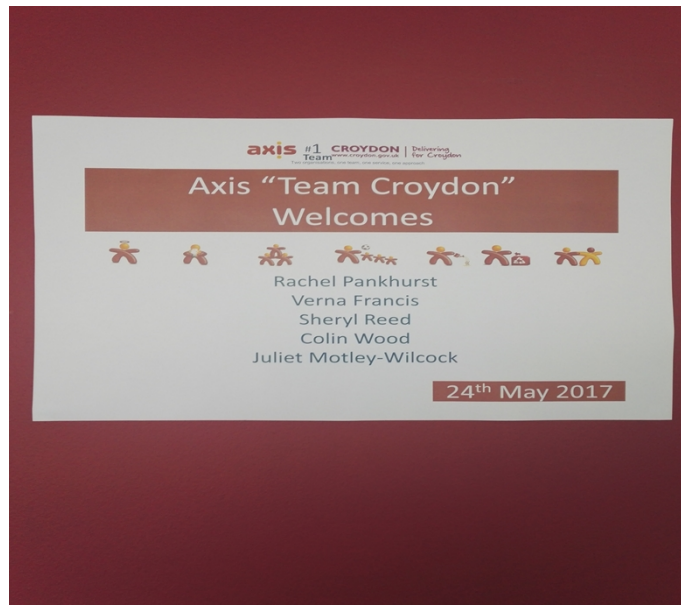


Fig. 11 Scrutiny panel during desktop review 6 April 2017



Fig. 12 Focus Group at Bernard Weatherill House



AXIS VISIT



Fig. 13 Axis 'Toolbox Talk'