



# A Tenant's Tale

## How Affinity Sutton fought and won the battle to deliver exceptional customer service in a highly competitive housing market.

The UK market has continued to put housing associations under significant pressure to become efficient. Only a limited number, those perceived by the Audit Commission and their clients to be successful, are eligible for additional funding. Without it, it is harder to deliver the best service to tenants. With such massive pressure to expand and grow, technology and consultancy to streamline services, provided by organisations such as Civica, plays a large part in delivering the best possible experience for tenants and housing association workers alike.

It's important to ensure residents get the support they need from their housing association. When tenants call, they want to be able to speak to one person who is able to deal with all their enquiries, rather than be passed from department to department. After all, when a boiler breaks down, the immediate problem is to get it fixed as quickly as possible, not to take a message, pass it to another department and make another call to the tenant.

Housing Group, Affinity Sutton, was created through the successful merger of the William Sutton Group and The Affinity Homes Group in 2006. The Group has eight operating companies including Broomleigh Housing Association and Downland Housing Association. As the group has grown so has the need to ensure all organisations within the group are integrated into the existing IT infrastructure.

Mike Yarde, ITU Director, Affinity Sutton comments: "Throughout the process of various mergers and acquisitions our main goal has been to standardise IT systems rather than complicate matters by introducing new ones. The pressure to deliver outstanding service, coupled with a fight for funding, has left us with a need to be efficient while giving tenants an unparalleled level of service."

He continues: "Affinity Sutton is a large group of housing associations and so our main goal was efficiency and interoperability, especially as the number of people using our systems grew significantly. We decided it was no longer good enough to make do.

"We were conscious that it was important to focus very much on our ability to deliver impeccable service to residents, so we focused on two main areas.



**Mike Yarde**  
ITU Director, Affinity Sutton

*"From a caller perspective, there is a lot less frustration as there is no need to have various personal details to hand; they are also able to talk to one person about anything, rather than simply being put on hold or passed to another operative. The experience is now a far more consistent and streamlined one."*

First, the Civica housing management system that sits at the centre of the operation has been in place for over twenty years at Broomleigh and has grown with the group. It's our primary tool, holding all information relating to our tenants including personal details, payment records and notes. We wanted to develop a much more proactive approach to improving service delivery and updating the system, rather than solely relying on reactive updates and complaints to spur us into action.

"Second, as Affinity Sutton was established, we wanted to make it as easy as possible to allow organisation within our group to work together and deliver a standardised customer service."

With a huge number of new residents all under the Affinity Sutton banner, Yarde and his team became conscious that they needed to come up with an action plan to deliver these improvements, and fast.

Yarde continues: "To create one effective operation, we considered various consultancy options, primarily looking at the major players in the market. We wanted to consolidate and enhance existing systems rather than make sweeping changes, meaning it made sense to work with existing Broomleigh partner Civica. We were attracted to the fact that Civica would happily recommend and implement solutions best suited to our needs, rather than limit our options to solutions developed by Civica. Essentially, our group structure revolves around standardisation, which Civica allowed us to do.

"Civica advised and consulted on the launch of a joint Broomleigh and Downland contact centre which was due for completion in October 2006. This would form the building blocks for a group wide contact centre, which is still one of our long term goals. The suggested approach was to deploy a contact centre solution and EDM/Workflow system to ensure effective communication between departments. Civica tailored a system appropriate to our budget and managed the project for delivery on time.

"The results are exactly what we needed and the contact centre currently handles 23000 calls a month. Previously each operative in our contact centre would work on an individual level, unable to have one simple of view of a tenant's interaction with other departments and whether there are any other outstanding queries to be dealt with."

The telephone system was integrated into contact centre manager, meaning:

- It is now possible to very quickly identify callers and log details of the call
- Depending on nature of the call, open the relevant housing association database immediately.
- It's also possible to identify calls simply by a registered telephone number, with no need to run through personal details such as name and address.
- Team leaders can keep more precise tabs on team performance, monitoring what's effective and identifying the need to allocate more operators to a particular housing association if there is a spike in calls for any reason.

Says Yarde: "From a caller perspective, there is a lot less frustration as there is no need to have various personal details to hand; they are also able to

talk to one person about anything, rather than simply being put on hold or passed to another operative. The experience is now a far more consistent and streamlined one.

"From Affinity Sutton's point of view, we can identify callers easily, and address any queries or information we may need from that caller during the same call. We now aim to answer 85% of all calls within 15 seconds and can now resolve 75% amount of calls first time, without the need for follow up. If needed, an enquiry entered into the system following a call is tagged with a required response time and automatically escalated if it isn't dealt with. Contact manager stores contacts into a document management system and now also offers process maps, meaning that every enquiry can be allocated with a "type".

"This new approach means we can use our time more effectively, as well as ensure our residents feel that their



enquiries are being resolved quickly. Specifically among Broomleigh residents, customer satisfaction levels increased by 3.6% in 2007 and we can also score our advisors on their performance when handling a call, ensuring consistent delivery of service.

At the same time, Civica has also been helping us update and overhaul our housing management system, the core operating environment for the whole organisation. This was done via a series of product enhancement groups (PEGs) - small focus groups



designed to identify ways to improve the system. It's now much easier for us to quickly identify solutions and improvements. The cost of implementing a brand new housing management system is not cost justifiable so it's important for us to work with what our existing system, a brand new product will never be able to meet all requirements. The latest enhancement has been the inclusion of a new finance module, which provides subsystems to track various types of payment from rent to fines."

## Looking forward

Yarde concludes: "Our work won't stop here. We've already turned our attention to mobile working. As our contact centre has begun to deliver unprecedented service, we're now looking to empower our housing officers to deal with a multitude of issues via PDAs linked directly to our central server. Once Civica has deployed this system, housing officers will no longer need to plan in advance when visiting a scheme, instead accessing all relevant information directly from a handheld device. At the same time they will also be able to identify if there are any other outstanding actions to be undertaken on site. If a repair is needed, the housing officer can take photos and email them back to the relevant department, so that the issue can be identified more quickly and dealt with."



Affinity Sutton's goal was never primarily to save money, instead the group is far more focused on offering an impeccable service to customers. The help of external consultant and supplier Civica has meant that in a highly competitive market, Affinity Sutton has managed to streamline interaction with customers, save money and enhance experience at the same time; a great achievement.

As William Sutton Homes becomes the third organisation within the Group to make use of Affinity Sutton's consolidated contact centre, plans are afoot to ensure that before long all associations within the group begin to offer the same level of unprecedented service.

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# Beyond: Service improvement and efficiency

We're all aware that housing associations are under increasing pressure to increase efficiency by cutting costs, as well as deliver outstanding customer service. But with the need for efficiency, it's all too easy to lose sight and control of the importance of customer service and care. Bigger merged housing associations tend to be more procurement efficiency-focused than specialist local providers. However, effective housing association management encompasses identifying customer needs as well as aligning resources and business processes. This will release efficiencies but it's impossible to apply a one size fits all approach. Similarly, when pursuing the Decent Homes Standard suppliers and providers must not get caught up in operational efficiency gain at the expense of customer care.

In the current climate, as this supplement shows, AffinitySutton has managed to buck the trend of larger merged housing associations. As residents of North Kensington declare independence from their housing association and form The Republic of Pepler House (Inside Housing, 15/02/08), AffinitySutton has led the market by allocating budget to improve efficiency in a strategic way. By allocating scarce resources to workflow, their call centre and the front office AffinitySutton has simultaneously managed to reduce costs and improve customer service.

If housing associations are ever to achieve the balancing act of cutting costs and improving customer service, as AffinitySutton has managed to do, there needs to be a shift in the traditional housing association/supplier relationship towards a partnership based on mutual outcomes and shared objectives. Most suppliers simply provide efficiency products/services and housing associations pay for them. However, successfully reconciling property renewal, service enhancement and efficiency targets, demands consultants and suppliers with expert delivery capabilities and deep knowledge of social housing operations. Associations that are embarking on such long term relationships will force suppliers

to take a more considered approach to their relationship with housing associations. This involves demonstrating a level of trust and commitment to mutual objectives beyond simply selling products, to deliver an end to end solution that encompasses IT and processes. To provide technology is one thing, but to understand the association or ALMO's wider business and its particular context is of increasing importance.

It's possible to purchase technologies such as Electronic Document Management (EDM) systems, workflow software and other solutions that will enhance efficiency in both the front and back office. However, we think that the final piece of the puzzle is the strategic element which looks at how all these different components work together to deliver the best possible service. If a tenant calls their Housing Association, but is still passed from very efficient department to very efficient department, this misses the point of efficiency. A strategic approach will, for example, empower one Housing Association employee to have an all encompassing view of a tenant's dealings with every department and check on the status of any outstanding requests.

In 2008, it's more important than ever for Housing Associations to look at their organisation and relationships with their suppliers. If there is no strategic relationship it's never going to be possible to improve customer service and cut costs without sacrificing one or the other. AffinitySutton has achieved this through a pragmatic approach that accepts that customer service cannot be compromised. Given that many housing associations are providing services to the most vulnerable in society, we think that it's impossible to be solely efficiency focused; striking a balance is key. Even when investment in efficiency saving solutions is made, it will inevitably take time to see true cost reductions from mergers and shared service deployments, as savings may be outweighed by transactional costs of restructuring in the short term.

As the recent Tribal Consulting report showed, the efficiency agenda was one of the key operational priorities trends for

2007. Performance management and an information culture were also important; in other words delivering an outstanding customer service model must be integrated into the drive for efficiency. For 2008, mobile working is key. Again, making this successful and implementing a common diary across all areas of the business are important.

For too long Housing Associations have been criticized by the Audit Commission for not implementing technologies that make it easier to work with and care for tenants onsite. By continuing to avoid adopting mobile technologies, housing associations will miss out on service uplift and systematic productivity gains. The most immediate area that will benefit from mobile working is repairs departments being able to manage workflow, access tenant files and report information away from the office. This will allow repair teams to tackle more repair requests in one go, without time-consuming travel back to their supply depots. Implementing a mobile policy will also allow wider staff home working, which again raise morale and increase productivity among customer-facing and support staff. Again, adopting a strategic approach and integrating mobile working into a larger streamlined system is another way to deliver the service tenants want, while increasing efficiency.

The struggle for achievable perfection will continue, but as our work with AffinitySutton shows, it is possible. Three star ratings are based on more than just the financials and cutting costs. As the government has already indicated those able to achieve this by aligning all core processes with operational needs will be able to improve long term procurement and other critical processes, utilise their workforce better and the most important thing: serve their tenants. And to do that, it's time to develop a long term relationship with your technology supplier, rather than simply treating them as a service.

John Hood,  
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## About Civica

Civica is one of the UK's most experienced providers of consulting, software and managed services, with particular focus on the public sector and regulated services.

The group works with more than 1,500 organisations in local government, social housing, criminal justice, education, defence and healthcare, including 89% of the UK's local authorities and all of the UK's 53 police forces. It has a 20-year history in the UK, Australia, Singapore and the USA.

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