

JMB repairs service

1. Background

1.1. About the JMB

We manage 1,100 tenants and 400 leaseholders. We have full responsibility for responsive and major repairs in our area. The desire to deliver a local responsive repair service was a key reason why the JMB was set up in 1996. The JMB has to win a continuation ballot every 5 years; the reliability of our responsive repair service is the prime criteria residents judge us by.

1.2. Organisation of repair service

The JMB Board plays an important role in the design of the service and setting service standards. The JMB Manager has operational responsibility for the quality of the repair service. On a day to day basis the service is organised by a Repairs Manager, Repairs Supervisor and Repairs Admin Officer. They work closely with another three staff members who work primarily on major repair schemes.

1.3. In-house repair team

A key decision taken when the JMB started was to set up an in-house repair team. In 1996 JMB directors were concerned by poor workmanship and over-charging endemic amongst repairs' contractors at that time. The JMB wanted to employ skilled repair people who would have a sense of loyalty towards the JMB. Our assessment is that our aspirations have been fulfilled. There are eight people employed, two started as apprentices. The team is able to undertake the full range of repairs, other than mechanical and electrical, roofing and uPVC window replacement works. In 2014/15 the team completed 3,429 repairs, with a value of £348,000.



1.4. Contractors

More specialist works such as roofing, electrical and uPVC window replacement and responding to out of hours emergencies are undertaken by AE Elkins Ltd, who were recruited in 2010 following a competitive tendering exercise on a JCT standard form of measured term contract. In 2014/15 AE Elkins Ltd completed repairs 1,224 jobs, the value of these repairs was £250,510.

The balance of in-house and contracted repairs is set out below:

	2013/14	2014/15
Total repairs ordered	6,482	4,635
In-house team	£490,000	£348,000
Elkins	£310,434	£250,510

Lift repairs are undertaken by Liftec, with technical advice being provided by degraaff consultants. In 2014/15 the JMB spent £66,848 on lift maintenance.

Like the council we were unhappy with the heating service being provided by the T. Brown Group, and after a competitive tendering process OCO will start work on 1.11.15. Technical advice is provided by David Miles Partnership. In 2014/15 the JMB spent £285,429 on heating maintenance.

Out of office hours our residents contact our Pinnacle call centre. Call centre staff stay in regular telephone contact with JMB managers.

Staff access to repair management and financial information is critical; this prompted the JMB to buy the ActiveH integrated housing management system.

2. Primary elements of JMB's repair delivery

JMB directors believe the four primary elements are:

- Local knowledge and continuity;
- Extensive checking of quality;
- Process mapping and management of difficult repairs; and
- Tight financial control.

2.1. Local knowledge and continuity

The JMB operates on a human scale. Our repairs' staff know our residents and our properties. Our staff team are proud of what they are achieving and want to stay.

Asset management is a long term commitment. Therefore having continuity of staff and contractors is really helpful. The JMB manager, Repairs Manager, Major Works Manager and two members of the in-house repair team have all worked for the JMB for more than nineteen years. This gives us a tremendous knowledge of our stock. It meant when the JMB prepared a stock condition survey we could use

the information in the heads of our staff and on our computer system. Our stock condition survey is of much higher quality than those prepared by expensive consultants.

2.1.1 In-house repair team

We are convinced about the value of an in-house team, our staff:

- Know our properties and tenants
- Are known and valued in the area, they do not want to let people down by doing a substandard repair
- Encourage us to organise routine maintenance, because it will make their work load more manageable
- Do not walk away because a repair is 'not on their job sheet'
- Communicate directly, we are not waiting for a contractor's back office to tell us about a problem or that a job is complete.

Residents really value the JMB's in-house repair team, but our team still have to pay their way. The way we have found to do this is to put our in-house team on the same footing as an external contractor. We order in-house repairs on the same schedule of rates codes as tendered by our external repair contractor, AE Elkins. We compare the value of work completed against the cost of the team i.e. wages, materials and vehicles. In 2013/14 the value of work exceeded cost by 18 % and in 2014/15 by 5%.

Having an in-house repair team gives us the flexibility to undertake planned work such as repair MOTs (described later). Also we have been able to offer our elderly and disabled tenants the opportunity to have one of their rooms redecorated.

2.1.2 Relationship with contractors

The JMB believes in competitive tendering, rather than partnering. Our belief is competitive tendering results in the best value for money. Our main contractors tell us we are a good client to work for because we organise their work effectively and pay promptly. This means that we can build up long term relationships with our best performing contractors. We were so pleased with the service being provided by AE Elkins and Liftec that the Board consulted with residents and gained a First Tier (Leasehold) Tribunal exemption from the requirement to re-tender these contracts.

Southwark officers have helped us with a cost comparison of responsive repair costs. In appendix 1 we compared commonly ordered items and found that JMB charges are lower. Although independently tendered our lift costs are the same as Southwark's. You will recognise the names our

main contractors as they work with Southwark Council. We benefit from the control of being a distinct client from Southwark, but we get similar rates to Southwark because contractors view JMB contracts as a way of spreading their Southwark contract costs a little more thinly.

We realised that we did not have the specialist knowledge to manage lift and heating contractors and therefore were vulnerable to over-charging. Before taking over responsibility for lifts we appointed degraaff. We have been able to dramatically improve our lift availability; between July and September 2015 it was 99.97%. Before taking over responsibility for heating we recruited the David Miles Partnership. The problematic performance of the T. Brown Group means that we cannot produce similarly impressive figures, but David Miles provided invaluable support in managing a difficult contract. We know that both consultants have saved us many multiples of the fees we have paid them.

2.2. Extensive checking of repairs

We check obsessively. In 2014/15 the JMB checked 51% of AE Elkins repairs and 12% of its in-house team. In the same year 61 of T. Brown Group jobs were personally checked and 199 residents contacted by phone. We do this because it has taken years to turn around the perception that in the public sector 'no one bothers to check.' Also we think it is really important that our contractors know that there is a high chance of their work being checked. Whilst our post inspection returns are very good, and we know we are spending more on checking than we are recovering for defective work, but we are reluctant to change our approach.

Between April 2013 and March 2015 the following repairs were checked

JMB Team

Check	Number checked	Good quality	Percentage
Visit by Repairs inspector	519	519	100%
Telephone call	573	571	99.6%
Total	1,092	1,091	99.9%

AE Elkins Ltd

Check	Number checked	Good quality	Percentage
Visit by Repairs inspector	634	624	98.4%
Telephone call	697	688	98.7%
Total	1,331	1,312	98.6%

2.3. Process mapping & management of 'difficult' repairs

2.3.1 Process mapping

Five years ago we were very concerned about the number of repairs going astray. Our aim was to ensure that as many repairs as possible are routine transactions, with the number of 'difficult repairs' being kept to a manageable number.

We decided to map our repair process as it was actually happening. We did not want to blame individuals, but we did want to understand where human error was occurring and whether we could design a repair process that reduced the chance of human error.

The key challenges we identified then remain challenges today, but we believe at a much lower level. Our key challenges are:

- **Capture all repair and inspection requests:** We want to provide multiple ways to report repairs, rather than rigidly routing all repairs through one contact point. We like residents, directors, staff and councillors to be able to let us know about repairs in the way that is most comfortable to them. This means our challenge is to record and process all of these repair requests. The key we believe is to get these requests onto our repair computer system, because a computer doesn't forget.
- **Effectively manage difficult repairs:** More about this in the next section
- **Accurately diagnose the repair:** Accurate diagnosis means the minimum disruption to our residents. It is also critical for our in-house team's productivity, our contractors' profitability and their workforce's ability to make a living on piece work rates. We need to think about whether preparatory work is needed, such as repairing a stop cock before a bath can be replaced, what materials are needed, is it a one or two person job, how long is needed to complete it?
- **Decisively close down repairs we are not doing:** Given the focus on getting jobs done it is easy to forget to tell people when we decide not to do the work, either because it is outside our responsibility or the resident has not given us access
- **Co-ordinating follow –up work:** responding to an immediate problem such as a water leak will focus people's minds, but we also need to reliably complete follow on works once the immediate problem is solved.
- **Chase up overdue repairs:** Our computer system tells us which repairs are overdue, so that we can chase up progress. Our challenge is get our contractors to provide timely completion information, so the information is meaningful.

We are currently reviewing our processes again. Useful feedback from our directors is that call centres are now so much part of our lives people like to receive a confirmation number and due by date when placing an order. This week we are sitting down with our in-house repair team and then we plan structured discussions with a handful of our tenants and our contractors.

2.3.2 Effectively managing difficult repairs

We decided that there will always be 'difficult repairs', however it is possible to keep the number to a minimum and manage them effectively. Repairs might become difficult because:

- We have got off on the wrong foot and need to get the repair back on track
- Legal/ arbitration action is threatened
- The diagnosis is complex
- The repair is expensive and price testing/ leaseholder consultation is needed
- There is an inter-relationship with major works e.g. we are seeing the problem frequently enough to consider planned replacement
- The resident is difficult
- The resident is vulnerable
- Two residents are involved and one is not providing access

The JMB manager meets monthly with responsive and major repair staff to review these cases.

2.4. Tight financial control

As a small financially independent organisation a large repair overspend would create major problems. To some extent expenditure is demand led, the storms around last Christmas caused a spike in expensive roofing repairs. Also there is the challenge of how to account for the repair orders we have placed with a contractor, but they have not confirmed completion. Our repair manager meets with our finance officer on a monthly basis to review expenditure. We only have four staff authorised to order repairs, so it is simple for us to keep them informed of the financial position. It means that we can avoid the stop/go of repairs ordering that happens in large organisations.

Having a reliable repair service helps income generation. Void work is shared between the in-house team and AE Elkins. The JMB achieved an average re-let time of 20 calendar days, whilst re-servicing voids to a high standard.

As planned repairs are better value than responsive repairs, our strategy is to maximise our expenditure tackling our major repairs backlog and to restrict our responsive repair expenditure. In 2014/15 the JMB achieved the goal it has been

working towards for some time of spending 70% of its annual asset management budget on major and planned repairs and restricting responsive repairs to 30%.

3. Secondary elements of the JMB's repair delivery

3.1. Measure what is important

The self generated repairs key performance indicators for most social housing managers are usually significantly higher than tenants' perception of the service. This is because social housing managers are evaluating the repairs completed, whilst residents will have in their mind the repairs they reported that were not completed. Therefore our focus is on making sure that repair requests do not get lost in the system. The JMB has no interest in using KPIs to make us look good. Our residents and directors are close enough to the service to know how good it is.

We give our performance information a high profile. It is scrutinised at a board sub group, named Performance sub. We have also started to publish this information on our website. As noted our quality checks are our most important information.

Not right first time: Different organisations apply this criterion differently. The JMB wants to capture cases where a human error either by us or our contractor has delayed the repair. Examples of 'not right first time' are, the repair request not been processed, an incomplete diagnosis, a missed appointment, the operative not turning up with the right materials. Again, the objective is not to blame an individual, but to help us understand where we need to tighten up our repair process. Perversely we are pleased that our 'not right first time' numbers are going up (14 jobs between July and September 2015). It means we are starting to embed this indicator and it is allowing us to start to identify trends.

Average repair completion time: Whilst we want to complete repairs within the time specified within the tenancy agreement, we are quite happy to report an average repairs completion time that is slower than other social housing organisations. Between July and September 2015 it was 12 days, when we have focussed on planned repairs it has been as long as 25 days. As many contracts include a premium for a quick response, the JMB would rather pay for more repairs than a quick response. Also the JMB wants to complete more planned and less reactive work.

3.2. Repair MOTs

In July 2014 our in-house repair team started to programme in repair MOTs, and have subsequently completed 108. We believe that planned maintenance can prevent bigger problems. Also we are aware that our most vulnerable resident might not report repairs or give up if the repair process goes wrong We schedule a visit to tenants' homes and:

- Check stop cocks and ensure that the tenant knows where they are
- Check fire safety i.e. smoke alarms and internal doors
- Check the tenant understands the heating system
- Undertake any minor maintenance e.g. re-washer taps
- Report back larger repairs
- Report on condensation issues

3.3. Integration

The majority of responsive repairs are generated from a minority of tenancies. This is a consequence of either the block/ property being in poor condition, in which case integration with our major repair team is essential, or the tenant is struggling to live independently, in which case integration with our housing team is essential.

Even though the JMB is much smaller than Southwark council we still have to work hard to integrate. As outlined above there can often be a cross-over between responsive and major repair issues. So for instance in a recent questionnaire a couple of tenants told us they were unhappy with our responsive repair service because of the condition of their front doors. We have had to stall our front door replacement programme because of the recent government announcements that mean we have to re-write our Major Repair Plan.

We have identified twenty-one people who have extreme difficulty in living independently. Within this sixteen are nine residents who have mental health issues that led to hoarding and acutely unhygienic living conditions. For these sixteen tenants even a routine repair is likely to become 'difficult', so collaborative working between the two teams is essential.

3.4. Minimise compensation payments

We are very keen to keep repair compensation payment and arbitration/ county court awards to a minimum. A high level of compensation payments means less money to complete repairs. Excluding heating since April 2014 the JMB has paid £468 in compensation and no legal fees. The JMB represents 2.7% of Southwark stock. Our disrepair cost costs scaled up to Southwark's size would result in the council's legal and compensation expenditure being £16,154.

3.5. Condensation

Condensation is historically a contentious issue between residents, who see it as a repair problem, and housing staff, who believe it is a life style issue. Conventionally housing managers have seen condensation as a problem that relates to specific properties. We are seeking to take more of an overview, mapping where it is occurring, its severity, consequences for the family and remedial action required. We are particularly keen to map the relationship between condensation and fuel poverty. Also we want to encourage a partnership

between the resident and the JMB to manage the problem, with both parties committing themselves to an agreed course of action and regular reviews.

3.6. Secondary Repair Policy

An unfortunate reality of living in a block is that if the person above does defective DIY or lets their bath overflow someone else suffers the consequences. We found that we were taking the blame when this happens. We therefore wrote and publicised a Secondary Repair Policy, which we have found has taken some of the emotion out of the problem.

3.7. High reliability

Whilst we work hard to implement our best practice and can see the improvement we don't get everything right all of the time. We want our residents to have high expectations and tell us when they think we are letting them down. We benefit from active directors, councillors, tenants associations and staff out and about who can tell us when they here of things going wrong. This brings us back to the start we think the key to us providing a high reliability repair service is being able to take in and process as much information as possible. We have to make the most of being local and personal.

4. Is the JMB approach replicable on a larger scale?

4.1 Independent neighbourhood management units

We believe that council housing is an asset that is best managed by people who have a long term personal commitment. 'Difficult' repairs are best managed by people who know the stock and residents.

We do not accept the common response that although local management works it is too expensive. Between 1996 and 2013 the basis of our funding methodology was 'how much would it cost the council to provide the same service'. So in 2013 we know our costs were comparable with the Council's. Although our funding regime has changed we have not increased our responsive repair costs, other than by inflation.

As demonstrated, even though we independently tender and our contracts are relatively small, our costs are lower or the same than Southwark's. More intensive and local management means better information that there is less wasted expenditure. When much lower disrepair legal and compensation costs are factored in we know that the case is compelling.

We properly resource our responsive and major works management because we understand the potential for contractors to over-charge and under-deliver if not properly supervised.

4.2 Specific ideas

If not already in place transferable ideas to a larger organisation are:

- Involve residents and front line staff in mapping the repair process
- Focus on difficult repairs
- Check obsessively
- Measure accurately performance criteria that matters to residents
- Integrate responsive repairs with major works and housing management
- Ensure appropriate technical support for heating and lift contracts
- Have a Secondary Repair Policy, to assist with inter-resident disrepair issues
- Undertake property MOTs
- Have a condensation strategy.