

STAR Customer Scrutiny Panel: Kitchen & Bathroom Review

March 2025

Chairs Statement:

On behalf of the Scrutiny Panel, I wish to express our sincere gratitude to the STAR Housing staff for their cooperation and support throughout our review process. The staff have been consistently helpful and approachable, providing us with transparent and relevant information that has been vital to our work.

We have been particularly impressed by the professionalism of the frontline staff. Their willingness to listen to the panel's perspective and their clear desire to improve the customer experience have been evident throughout our interactions. This professionalism underscores the positive impact STAR Housing has on its community and the importance of our efforts to enhance customers' experiences.

We are grateful for the support and advice provided to our panel during this review. We are confident that the outcomes will contribute to the ongoing improvement of services, ensuring that resident experiences continue to improve.

Nicky Richardson, Chair of the STAR Customer Scrutiny Panel, on behalf of the full panel.

Executive Summary

Between December 2024 and March 2025, the STAR Customer Scrutiny Panel conducted a comprehensive review of STAR Housing's kitchen and bathroom service delivery. The aim was to enhance service quality and ensure alignment with recent regulatory updates, such as the Regulator of Social Housing's Consumer Standards and the Building Safety Act 2022. The review focused on the customer journey and quality controls within the service. Key areas examined included quality assurance, resident communication, and operational efficiency.

The panel employed various methods to gain a deep understanding of the service landscape, including service briefings, document reviews, resident feedback, site visits, and staff interviews. These methods highlighted several areas for improvement.

The panel noted that STAR Housing has recently implemented several changes to the kitchen and bathroom contract, including new contract management processes. Resident feedback suggests that the organisation could further improve consistency, quality assurance, and communication. The panel believes these improvements could enhance the overall service experience.

To address these findings, the panel has recommended strategic enhancements, such as standardising quality assurance processes, refining communication strategies, and increasing awareness of the tenant portal among customers and staff. These recommendations aim to provide a more efficient and resident-focused service. The panel advocates for implementing these recommendations through a time-bound action plan.

Introduction – Including Scope of the Scrutiny

The Customer Scrutiny Panel at STAR Housing began a focused scrutiny to understand the kitchen & bathrooms replacement service. This scrutiny was launched in response to a discussion about the panel's experience of the process, insights gathered from customers' experience and discussions with the management team.

Purpose of the Scrutiny: The scrutiny aimed to review the kitchen and bathroom replacement process at STAR Housing, ensuring they align with resident expectations and to ensure a robust quality assurance process is in place.

Scope of the Scrutiny: The panel decided to concentrate on key aspects that will have the biggest impact on customer satisfaction and the customer journey, which include:

1. **Quality and Design Assessment:**
 - a. Kitchens and bathrooms layout, functionality, material quality, and aesthetic design.
 - b. Balancing quality and cost considerations.
2. **Customer Experience and Communication:**
 - a. Enhancing customer communication strategies and feedback mechanisms.
 - b. Evaluating customer preferences and choices to improve satisfaction.
3. **Data Management and Inspection Effectiveness:**
 - a. Improving data management systems for better data collection, storage, and analysis.
 - b. Ensuring thorough and effective inspections with detailed checklists and reporting.
4. **Contractor Performance:**
 - a. Assessing contractor performance based on timeliness, workmanship quality, and customer reviews.
 - b. Implementing performance improvement plans.

Goals of the Scrutiny: The primary objective was to ensure that all residents enjoy good-quality, safe, and pleasant living conditions. By scrutinising these specific areas, the panel sought to identify improvements that would raise the standard to a level that residents would perceive as "good," thereby contributing to overall satisfaction and well-being.

Process

The scrutiny conducted by the panel was thorough, incorporating various data collection methods to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the repairs and maintenance service at STAR Housing. Supported by STAR's Customer Engagement Manager, the panel employed the following methods:

Data Collected:

- **Briefings on Key Areas of Service Delivery:**
 - Programmed Works Officer
 - Asset Manager
 - Operations Director
- **Document Reviews:**
 - Best Practice Peer Review of Planned Maintenance
 - STAR Housing post inspection form
 - STAR Housing initial kitchen and bathroom letter
 - 23/24 Tenant Satisfaction Measures report
 - Customer choices documents for kitchens and bathrooms
 - Key Performance data relating to kitchen and bathroom contract
 - Customer communication timeline
- **Feedback Analysis:**
 - Resident complaints about kitchens and bathrooms
 - Voicescape Repairs Survey Data on kitchen and bathrooms
- **Site Visits:**
 - Two visits to empty homes being prepared for re-let
- **Surveys:**
 - Commissioning a one-off survey on the residents' experience of the kitchen and bathroom process, before and after new contractor ^[1]
- **Interviews:**
 - Panel interviews with staff in key service areas, including the Programmed Works Officer and Operations Director.
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Scrutiny Support: The panel was supported by access to internal data, collaborative efforts with STAR Housing staff, and independent support from the Customer Engagement Manager. This enabled a structured and well-supported scrutiny process, ensuring the findings were based on robust data and comprehensive insights.

^[1] Exact statistical significance and margin of error was not reliable enough for the panel to consider the performance data, however, they have utilised the comments left in the free text element of the survey.

Recommendations

The Customer Scrutiny Panel were made aware that the contract reallocation took place in September 2024, whilst the timing of this was due to the previous contract coming to an end, the Panel are aware that customer satisfaction was low prior to this. The impact of this change is reflected in the Voicescape customer satisfaction figures, which increased significantly to 100% from September 2024 to January 2025.

The Panel acknowledge the success of the kitchen and bathroom replacement programme in tenanted properties across several key areas. The contract management and quality assurance processes have been executed with diligence, ensuring replacements meet high standards of quality and efficiency. Additionally, the robust follow-up process for addressing any snagging issues further underscores this commitment to excellence.

The panel has identified 12 recommendations to further enhance service delivery and ensure continued tenant satisfaction. These are detailed below:

1. **Recommendation:** Implement a standardised quality assurance process for both tenanted and empty homes, ensuring all snagging issues are promptly recorded and rectified.

Desired Outcome: Consistent Quality Assurance Process: Establish a uniformed approach to maintaining quality for both tenanted and vacant homes.

Customer Scrutiny Panel Evidence: During a visit to a vacant property where the new contractor had installed a kitchen, the panel noted that although a Void Inspection form was completed, the new kitchen and bathroom sign-off form was not utilised. Several snagging issues were identified by the panel that would have been addressed, if the new form had been used. Additionally, the panel observed that the kitchen floor did not appear to be non-slip; it has since been confirmed that it is non-slip, this detail would have been recorded if the kitchen and bathroom sign-off form had been used.

Suggested Action: Update Voids inspection process to include Kitchen & bathroom sign off sheet.

2. **Recommendation:** Change the wording of the initial contact letter from STAR to a more positive tone, that informs the tenant who their point of contact is at Blyth to promote an enhanced experience.

Desired Outcome: Positive Initial Contact: Improved customer satisfaction with communication from STAR and Contractor.

Customer Scrutiny Panel Evidence: This relates to the initial letter from STAR, which informs the customer that they are due a kitchen and/or bathroom replacement. This letter introduces the customer to the contractor. The panel feels that the

current letter has a negative tone and the lack of reference to an individual contact makes it feel impersonal.

Suggested Action: Revise the letter to use positive language and include clear contact information for the contractor's administrator, who will be the main point of contact. Ensure the wording does not imply potential issues.

3. **Recommendation:** To enhance the customer experience during the kitchen/bathroom replacement process, it is recommended to update the customer information booklet to include clear information and reassurance about the process.

Desired Outcome: Enhance customer relations and communication channels by providing a comprehensive and reassuring information booklet about the kitchen/bathroom replacement process.

Customer Scrutiny Panel Evidence: Given the significant disruption caused by kitchen and bathroom replacements, the panel believes that customers should receive enhanced reassurances and comprehensive information well in advance. This allows for consideration of individual circumstances and time for any reasonable adjustments to be made.

Suggested Action: Update the booklet with clear, step-by-step information and FAQs to address common concerns. Incorporate the timeline document graphic for better visual understanding. Additionally, communications should clearly state that the contractor will work with the customer to find a mutually convenient time. Lastly, the panel would like it to be explicitly mentioned that timescales are approximate to manage customer expectations effectively.

4. **Recommendation:** Engage customers in the design process and provide them with a simple plan of the new kitchen design.

Desired Outcome: Involving customers in the design process will ensure they feel engaged and well-informed, leading to increased levels of satisfaction.

Customer Scrutiny Panel Evidence: Feedback from the customer survey highlighted concerns about the underutilisation of space, with one respondent noting, "I have at least 4 feet of empty space that could have been utilised more efficiently."

Additionally, another customer mentioned to a panel member that they could not recall the agreed-upon kitchen design details prior to the installation and would have benefitted from being left with a basic plan.

Suggested Action: Ensure space is fully utilised and leave a basic, easy-to-understand design plan with the customer after the design consultation. Contact details should be added in the event of any queries.

5. **Recommendation:** Ensure continuity in service by identifying and addressing potential single points of failure and implementing a succession plan to minimise the impact of STAR Housing staff changes on customer experience and service delivery.

Desired Outcome: Business continuity and increased customer satisfaction, ensuring that the customer is well informed.

Customer Scrutiny Panel Evidence: The Panel members have experienced the negative effects of STAR Housing staff turnover, which has led to work not being followed up by replacements and poor communication. This issue is not limited to the topic of this review.

Suggested Action: Identify the single points of failure within the business. Develop a succession plan and cross-train staff to cover key roles, ensuring seamless service continuity. Utilise the housing management system to ensure records are kept up to date.

6. **Recommendation:** Ensure timely updates to the housing management system to accurately reflect the progress of jobs.

Desired Outcome: Improved, reliable and up to date data on the housing management system, which then reflects to the Tenant Portal.

Customer Scrutiny Panel Evidence: The panel observed that communal area jobs were still marked as open, even though the work had been completed. An investigation revealed that these jobs were not being updated as completed in the housing management system, which the Tenant Portal mirrors. Further investigation showed that not all jobs completed by contractors using the contractor portal are updated at all stages, affecting the data held on the Tenant Portal. For example, jobs not being progressed to the "appointment booked" stage, do not show appointment details on the Tenant Portal.

Suggested Actions: Implement a protocol for timely updates for both jobs completed by STAR and those completed by contractors.

7. **Recommendation:** Ensure all STAR Housing staff receive comprehensive training on the capabilities of the Tenant Portal, enabling them to effectively promote its benefits to customers.

Desired Outcome: Staff are thoroughly trained and fully knowledgeable about the Tenant Portal, enabling them to promote the service with customers.

Customer Scrutiny Panel Evidence: It became apparent through the review that some staff have limited knowledge of the system and its capabilities, which hinders their ability to effectively advise customers.

Suggested Action: Conduct training sessions on the portal's capabilities and incorporate this training into the staff induction process. Additionally, create a short Tenant Portal promotion video to ensure understanding and engagement.

8. **Recommendation:** Increase visibility and promotion of the Tenant Portal.

Desired Outcome: To increase the number of customers using the Tenant Portal. Thus, ensuring ease of access to their tenancy information and the ability to report and check the status of repairs.

Customer Scrutiny Panel Evidence: The review revealed that most of the Panel were unaware of the Tenant Portal, which is likely to be reflected in the wider customer base. The Panel understands that this is currently being replaced with an improved version, therefore promotion may be delayed until the new portal is live.

Suggested Action: Move the Tenant Portal to the most prominent position on the website. Create a short how-to video for users and promote it regularly to all customers at various stages throughout their tenancy.

9. **Recommendations:** Establish a method to monitor the durability of kitchen units and doors, with checks every 3-5 years. This approach aims to increase customer satisfaction by maintaining well-kept homes, ensuring value for money by balancing cost and quality, and consistently meeting the Decent Homes Standard.

Desired Outcome: Kitchen unit durability is being monitored and increased customer satisfaction with the home being well maintained.

Customer Scrutiny Panel Evidence: The panel visited an empty home that had a new kitchen installed, concerns were raised over the quality of the kitchens being installed and felt that they may not withstand the test of time.

Suggested Action: Develop a monitoring schedule and criteria for assessing durability.

10. **Recommendation:** To improve post-installation communication.

Desired Outcome: Enhanced customer satisfaction through effective communication and regular updates.

Customer Scrutiny Panel Evidence: When reviewing the Scrutiny Panel's own customer survey results, for those who had an installation under the new contract, it was found that satisfaction levels were higher before and during the installation (80%) compared to after the installation (60%). The panel believes that by enhancing communication following the installation, overall customer satisfaction would improve.

Suggested Action: Set up a follow-up communication plan to address any post-installation issues and gather feedback.

11. **Recommendation:** Develop a strategy to box in visible pipes wherever practical, enhancing the overall appearance and quality of the living spaces.

Desired Outcome: Enhanced customer satisfaction that the home is well maintained and safe.

Customer Scrutiny Panel Evidence: It is recommended that all visible pipework in bathrooms and kitchens should be boxed in. This measure aims to provide a tidy and fresh appearance, improving the overall visual appeal and safety of these spaces. By concealing the pipework, we can achieve a more streamlined and modern look, which is both practical and aesthetically pleasing. Additionally, this improvement is expected to enhance tenant satisfaction by ensuring that homes meet high standards of safety, quality and comfort therefore contributing to a better living experience.

12. **Recommendation:** Determine how the insights from this review can be applied across the broader business, with a special emphasis on Planned Maintenance to ensure uniformity in the service improvement plan.

Desired Outcome: Improved overall customer satisfaction.

Customer Scrutiny Panel Evidence: Research during this review indicated that other scrutiny panels assessed kitchens and bathrooms through their planned maintenance reviews. Town & Country made recommendations in their scrutiny review of Planned Maintenance, suggesting that notices should be put up in communal areas (if applicable) when works are taking place on properties with shared spaces. This is to inform neighbours of potential disruptions, such as noise. The panel considers that many of these recommendations could be adapted to other business areas, particularly Planned Maintenance, as this work is executed by contractors in a similar fashion to the kitchen and bathroom contracts.

Ensuring Implementation

The panel further recommends that the final agreed recommendations be developed into an action plan created from the agreed recommendations ratified by the Board against a clear timeline. The panel also suggests incorporating an agreed process for dealing with slippage and/or non-implementation and monitoring from customer, management and governance perspectives with assurance that the action plan is reported back to the Customer Scrutiny Panel via the Customer Service Subcommittee.