

Top Ten Tips For Managing Your Maintenance

Many of us aspire to buy more properties and expand our business. But a potential consequence can be a maintenance headache. Just how do you streamline your maintenance so that it feels routine and manageable? How do you balance your desire to provide excellent customer service with the unknowns that repair issues can throw up and the free spirited world of some tradesman? Here's an experienced landlord's perspective:

1. DIY or Agent?

Most agents will manage your property for around 12% of your rental income and this may suit you if you do not live close to your property. The advantage of this is that the agent will have a team of maintenance people and will be able to deal with enquiries on a 24 hour basis. The disadvantage is that they don't always visit the property to check the work has been done properly and nobody will ever care for your property as much as you do. If you choose to use an agent, try to get one through personal recommendation.

The obvious advantage of managing property yourself is that you will save on agent charges and keeping a closer eye on your property could save on the costs of long term deterioration. Tenants often appreciate the extra care provided by a landlord and may reciprocate by taking greater care of the property themselves. You will need a team of tradespeople and may have to field calls and emails at all hours. Make a business case for the use of your own time. Should you be paying somebody else to do it and use your valuable time to seek more deals? Some landlords negotiate an hourly service with local independent agents or hire their own part time lettings manager.

2. Your attitude

Encourage tenants to report repairs quickly and reward their diligence by dealing with them promptly. The longer a roof is left to leak, the greater the damage and the more costly the repair. Sometimes we can see a repair request as trivial, but try to see it from the tenant's perspective. A tenant recently asked me to block a hole under a fence where a fox was accessing the garden. I suggested he block it with bricks, but I later discovered that his wife was too scared to let their toddler use the garden because the foxes had such easy access. Blocking the hole was a small, inexpensive job for my builder, but meant a lot to the tenant, who has now renewed for another year.

Try to get as much information about the repair as possible. Do some research online to get the right part and talk through it with the tradesperson and the tenant. Encourage the tenant to send you a photo and send this on to the tradesperson. This is easy with whatsapp, smartphones and emails. You are much more likely to get the repair resolved in one, less costly and less time consuming visit: great for everyone. Keep the tenant informed on progress.

Decide when your intervention could get the repair sorted more quickly or effectively. Sometimes with issues like drains or damp issues, where the cause is not obvious, visiting the property and speaking to the tradesman can really help you to get to the root of the problem. At one of my properties, the engineer was about to give up unblocking a drain after rodding it. By quizzing him I found out a colleague had a suction machine - he came and did clear the blockage. If I hadn't been there that process could have taken several more visits. Use your inner community worker – be helpful and collaborative to get the best out of people who are often doing grim jobs.

3. Getting The Right Trade

Some jobs require more than one skill, but it would be costly to get two people to attend. I've sent electricians to change electric ovens before and they've then called me to tell me the oven doesn't fit. I now know most single integrated ovens are a standard size. It's a minor electrical task but the carcass where the oven fits may need to be readjusted, so send somebody who can do that too.

The ideal maintenance person is somebody with a range of skills, but then you need to get a handle on what they do well and what their weak points are. Be wary of somebody who says they'll have a go at doing another job for you when it's not their area of expertise unless you've seen other examples of their work. Will all tradespeople try to see work that they've done before and get recommendations from other customers.

If you're going to manage tradespeople yourself you will need to develop enough knowledge of painting and decorating, plumbing, plastering, gardening, roofing and general building works to be able to assess whether they are doing a decent job. Some landlords learn or know trades and do the work themselves, most of us don't. But it will really benefit your business if you do some research. Use books like 'The Construction Of Houses' by Duncan Marshall or websites as a reference. If you've never done a full refurbishment, try and observe a fellow developer in action. Talk to, watch and learn from tradespeople.

4. Job Sheets & Contracts

Some maintenance contractors are more organised than others, my brilliant builder uses his van dashboard as a filing cabinet. There is a lot of key information that needs to be communicated about repairs, so this is why I use job sheets. They include obvious details like the name of the tenant, contact details, parking information, timescale and the task required. Let the contractor contact the tenant directly, but you will still need to do some chasing to make sure it happens and is resolved.

Tenants and landlords may have an office mindset - where people just turn up at a specified time - and don't understand why the engineer can't just be there at 10am. I explain to tenants that it's hard to determine how complicated a repair will end up being and that's why it's so difficult to schedule an exact time, so I aim to give 2-3 hour timeslots. Obviously,

you need to tailor this to your market and manage your tenants' expectations. Tenants in a high end corporate let might expect you or an agent to be present, others might be at home or able to work from home. Building a good relationship with tenants will usually mean that they can let you or your maintenance contractor attend with keys. This is about trust, never take it for granted and always ask for permission.

I know of too many cases of people undertaking major works without creating a contract. To minimise the chances of falling out, you must create a schedule of works outlining in specific objectives each task, agreed prices and a payment schedule. Make sure there is a lump sum of up to 25% payable on satisfactory completion. Creating the contract will also force you to talk through the works, understand all aspects of them and get a feel for how co-operative your contractor is.

5. Fixed or Flexible Pricing

All investors want to strike a good deal, it's in our DNA. The most common complaint I hear from agents, tenants and contractors is that landlords are penny pinching, so if that sounds like you, make sure you tame your cost controlling instincts. It's rarely cost effective to patch up with silicone, better to repair or replace for the long term. Ask yourself how do I manage this so that it's less likely to go wrong again. Often landlords think works are too expensive because they don't fully understand the complexity of the repair. Make it your business to understand.

Generally there are two ways to agree prices with builders. He or she gives you an estimate and this is then adjusted depending on what they end up doing. The advantage is the works may turn out as cheap as the estimate, but a classic sales technique is to quote low to get the work and then slap on some extras. We are often put off by fixed prices because they are higher, but the builder is factoring in the risk that there may be unexpected problems. A fixed price is insuring you, the customer, against any unexpected expenses.

Some landlords negotiate special deals with local suppliers and there are landlord group buying schemes. If you have a long standing relationship with contractors they will often be open to you supplying materials. But this can irritate some contractors who feel you are just trying to squeeze their profits as much as possible. I don't mind contractors making a reasonable markup on materials. After all they probably have to order them, go and collect them and deal with any ensuing problems with suppliers and that costs time and petrol. Remember you want your contractor to make a profit so that he will be hungry for more work from you.

An overpriced quote is code for 'I don't want to do the job.' It can be particularly tricky trying to get minor building works done in conurbations like London where contractors prefer big jobs. You are more likely to get a good quote for small jobs from a contractor you have an ongoing relationship with as you provide a lot of repeat business. Failing that just get more quotes and it really is worth searching online and seeing what turns up - but do get

references. I have found some great contractors this way. Be wary of getting a great quote for the first job and then finding that subsequent quotes seem to get more expensive. Some contractors take advantage of your trust in this way. Also if a contractor is a bit expensive but just does a better standard of work, it may be cost effective to pay a bit more.

6. Choose low maintenance fittings and appliances

When installing fittings and fixtures for rental properties, try to choose items that are standard and easy to maintain. I installed a non-standard, fancy shower fitting for a house in Stratford. Three years later a tiny rubber washer broke, I couldn't get another one anywhere and had to replace the whole fitting. Avoid chasing thermostatic shower fittings into walls, when they stop working you'll have to retile the whole area. Raise shower cubicle trays so that there is an access point underneath. External steel stairs will allow rain to run through, whereas asphalted concrete stairs will get soaked and cause damp in the cupboard or whatever is underneath. A bathroom without an extractor fan or window is asking for mould. If you have an uneven kitchen floor don't tile it - they will crack - laminate it. To avoid weeds in patios, lay slabs on concrete not just sand. When refurbishing properties think about low maintenance solutions.

I buy mid range white goods averaging £200-£250 per appliance and expect to replace them after 5 years. I get 5 year extended warranties on anything that uses water like dishwashers and washing machines as I find these are most likely to go wrong. That takes the hassle out of getting them repaired: if they go wrong after 5 years, I replace them. It's not cost effective to buy top of the range appliances for tenanted properties, as people just do not look after rented things with the same care as they would if it were their own. But don't buy the cheapest as it won't last and it sends a message to the tenant that you have little regard for them.

7. Proactive management

Maintaining and improving your properties should be a key part of your business model. This will ensure you get great tenants, maintain your asset and benefit from capital growth. I have a number of scheduled maintenance plans for my properties, projects that I intend to carry out at the right moment and before they become essential. I have just relandscaped a garden that tended to get full of weeds, with a neat low maintenance patio and lawn and a hard wearing feather edge fence with concrete posts. It looked ok before but I was sick of weeding. Now it looks great and the tenants love it. I've replaced single glazed windows in a Victorian flat on a busy road with double glazed timber sash. The tenant paid a small contribution because he was keen to reduce the noise. The project was his suggestion and we are both delighted with the result: I knew in the back of my mind that these windows would need replacing at some point. I've just patched up some valleys on a bay roof of a terraced house. The whole roof was really tired when I bought it four years ago, but the property has doubled in value and I've now got plans to re-tile it. The longer I leave it, the

greater the risk that I will have to pay to patch the roof up again. I try to carry out projects with tenants in place as they often appreciate the improvement and it avoids a costly void.

8. Managing Builders & Handymen

Your builder will have a wide range of skills across several trades and be good at managing other workers. They should understand your needs for a fast turnaround and getting the place rented. A good builder will work to building regulations and a good standard of finish. An ability to communicate and negotiate with you and a mutual respect and trust are absolutely vital: you should work as a great team. My role is to source properties, put deals together and get finance. He needs me to have a clear vision, arrange site visits to discuss progress, make timely decisions and know when to leave him to get on with the work. I would far rather my builder manage other tradespeople than me. They seem to speak the same language and I am just too nice.

The three biggest complaints I hear about builders are about quality of workmanship, timescales and disputes about money. With the first issue, some builders do work they are not expert at because it saves them paying for extra labour. One of my builders was a brilliant bricklayer and a terrible carpenter and didn't see the need to bring in other expertise.

Good builders will be in demand and have other work, so I don't mind them going to other jobs, as long as they leave other staff on site to progress the project. An important contribution from the developer is to plan ahead and make sure materials and admin requirements like permits are ordered in time.

Disputes about money often happen when there are changes to the programme of works. I have a form that I complete when there is an agreed change and we both sign it. This, along with an agreed schedule of works and contract helps eliminate disputes. Some builders are uncomfortable about being pinned down in this way, I think it's essential. Assuming your builder is skilled and talented, 90% of success is down to your relationship and how you manage boundaries. The last thing you want is to be abandoned with a half completed project. The next builder will be wary of hidden problems and add a premium to complete the work. All builders and tradespeople criticise one another's work, that just seems to be a given.

The challenge with handymen is they may be jack of all trades and master of none. Couple that with a 'have a go at anything' attitude and you can sometimes get shoddy work and a well-intentioned attempt to patch things up. Ideally a handyman will have worked as a builder - maybe retired - and have experience of a wide range of repairs. But if they are not regularly on site with other builders, they can quite become deskilled. A good builder is an optimum choice for repairs but busy builders often don't want to get roped into minor jobs. I have negotiated an arrangement with my builder where he does maintenance jobs on a Saturday and that is working well.

9. Plumbers & Gas Safe Engineers

The key challenge with leaks is getting to the root of the cause and often an urgent response is required. This is probably the most common area where landlords use insurance policies. I have found developing a long term relationship with a reliable plumber very beneficial for my business as they will be flexible and provide a quick response when needed. Talk through the problem with the tenant to diagnose exactly what's going on. They may be able to resolve issues like bleeding radiators, adjusting boiler pressure or turning the stop cock off with your help over the phone. Some guidance like an induction meeting when they move in or information in a tenant handbook can also be useful preventative measures.

Most rented properties have combination boilers with a lifespan of about 8-10 years. Talk to your gas safe engineer about which brands he prefers. Many landlords will use budget boilers like Main because the parts are cheap and they are easy to repair. Some swear by top of the range Vaillant and argue that the extra cost saves money in the long term. Beware brands that require expensive parts when faults develop. Fitting a new boiler can often cost as much as the boiler itself, even though it is one day's work. Make sure the system is power flushed when changing the boiler and fit a filter to capture sludge in future. My gas safe engineer has provided me with a 7 year warranty on a new Valiant at my Lewisham house but this is only effective if the boiler is serviced every year. He has offered to do this when he issues the gas safe certificate at no extra cost, so he keeps my business and I think I've got a good deal. At over £200 per year, the cost of boiler insurance equates to purchasing and fitting a new boiler after 6-7 years of premiums, so I do not see this as good value.

10. To clean or get cleaners

Several of my NLA colleagues clean properties themselves. One who lets to students says she becomes Mrs Mop at the end of term every year and gives her properties a deep clean. When I refurbish, my builder has a labourer who sweeps up and leaves the property in reasonable condition, so I then clean the property myself, partly because I find cleaning contractors often work to a mediocre standard. I find it beneficial taking time myself to thoroughly go through the property.

Cleaning is a two part process, removing the dirt with the first clean and then creating a gleaming finish with the second. I find professional cleaners can be in a rush, although a tenant changeover clean is rarely charged at less than 8 hours. So if you use a contractor, seek recommendations. Cleaning carpets and ovens I find are jobs for the professionals. Windows are often neglected by tenants, I usually offer a complimentary inside and out window clean after the first year to remind them how nice it is to have clean windows and this sometimes encourages them to get them cleaned occasionally.