

# Customer service – the vital third ingredient



**The country needs new homes and the housebuilders are charged with supplying them. But can utilities support the challenge? Yes, says TriConnex's technical director **Simon Gallagher**, with strong regulation, competition and a special ingredient ...**

## The Last Word

I have to admit that, despite having worked for one of the biggest utilities in the UK, I have not associated the phrase “brilliant customer service” with the utilities sector. This was in spite of my best efforts as a senior manager who passionately believes in delivering exceptional levels of delivery.

However, things have changed as I recently joined TriConnex – a different kind of utility provider. I thought I would use this opportunity to reflect on the impact that independent utility providers can have on housebuilders, and their targets.

The housing shortage has been discussed at length on these pages. I think we all agree meeting the government's, and more importantly society's, need for new homes is going to be a massive challenge, but one that we are all fully signed up to. I honestly believe that if chosen correctly, independent utility providers can accelerate rather than stand in the way of these massive targets, due to three ingredients – two mundane, and one special.

### strong regulation

Before the advent of strong regulation around utility connections, which eventually led to thriving competition in electricity and gas (with water well along the way), developers and housebuilders were subject to long lead times and a take it or leave it approach to customer service from the monopoly utilities. Unfortunately, a housebuilder could not often “leave it”, but had no choice. This raised risk to plans, and could end up with missed completed plots, not to mention raised blood pressure on site and the office. Strong regulation has resulted in skilled independent connection providers offering the same robust connections, quicker and with less pain than before, with all the legal, statutory and regulatory status of the incumbent utilities. Some (such as TriConnex) can offer all utilities from conception to connection for all the utilities – gas, water, electricity and fibre to the home – from one provider.

### competition

After strong regulation and the new Independent connection providers, came genuine competition. This drove innovation in the connection process. At first

the independent market was all about replicating the incumbent utilities on a smaller scale and specifying the best networks and operating the assets in a regulated and profitable way. Innovation came in the form of independent connection providers who are connections providers only – they deliver value by designing and building robust quality networks, but in such a way that suits the developer and their phases, rather than the end asset operator. There is a big difference in this approach. Connections-only providers are not concerned with storms or emergencies for example and all too often the reason for missed appointments by those who have such obligations.

### brilliant customer service

The third aspect that will really support housebuilders with the big challenge of volume is the issue I started with – “brilliant customer service”. Within TriConnex, whilst we are relentless at minimising waste and costs, we invest considerably in that magic ingredient – “brilliant customer service”. To us this means fast turnarounds, constant and open communication, seamless integration with design and site teams, and above all flexibility.

**TriConnex can offer all utilities from conception to connection for all the utilities – gas, water, electricity and fibre to the home – from one provider**

This level of customer service means we will not always be the cheapest tender, but when you have a change on site, the last thing you will hear is: “We will process that in 25 working days ...”!

So how can these three elements accelerate meeting

our collective housebuilding targets? If all three are done well together, land can be quickly assessed in terms of required utilities, diversions and any reinforcement required. These can all be handled for the housebuilder by an independent connection provider, cutting down complexity and timescales, and therefore speeding up the whole process.

So, having been at TriConnex for three months, when I now think of “brilliant customer service”, do I think of utilities?

You are probably not surprised that I do – but not just because I think that is what we are doing. But because our customers tell us that we seem to be getting it right. **hb**