

How can the Council and YHN effectively engage with tenants who will be impacted by carbon neutral pilot projects for Council housing?

1. Why we chose to scrutinise this topic

The UK Parliament declared a climate change emergency in April 2019 as a consequence of increased global warming. Newcastle City Council (NCC) at the same time also declared an emergency and established a Climate Change Committee which received its first report in March 2020, committing the city and the Council to become carbon neutral by 2030 – twenty years ahead of the government’s target.

The aim of the Committee will be to improve the energy performance of households through a range of techniques and interventions, including:

- Energy saving interventions
- Energy efficiency interventions
- Low energy sources/low carbon energy generation interventions.

2. Scope of the Review

SIFT set a clear scope for the scrutiny and considered the following:

- The range of carbon neutral projects Newcastle City Council and Your Homes Newcastle have initiated
- If the pilot projects have positively or negatively impacted tenants
- What the financial benefits projects bring for tenants
- If activities match Your Homes Newcastle’s (YHN) and NCC’s carbon reduction strategies and targets.

3. How we scrutinised this service area

During this scrutiny we completed a number of activities to gather evidence, these included:

- A briefing by the service lead
- Assessing communication and engagement methods used
- Benchmarking
- Interviews with other organisations implementing carbon neutral projects
- Reviewing satisfaction and complaints
- Mystery shop.

4. Overview of SIFT's Findings

Coming from the climate change emergency a number of plans by both NCC and YHN were set out to reduce CO2 emissions to support climate change. This includes the pledge to power the city with 100% clean energy and reduce CO2 emission to net zero by 2030, 20 years ahead of the national target.

Housing contributes around a third of the CO2 generated in the city with businesses and transport the other key contributors. To meet the city's climate change commitment, the amount of CO2 generated from homes needs to be reduced.

If the Council's target of net-zero carbon by 2030 is to be achieved then plans on financing the work to retrofit Council properties need to be developed. If the plans are all ready in place SIFT would be interested in seeing them, as members currently do not have any information on retrofitting costs. A number of studies by other social landlords, for example Raven Housing Association, based in southern England, demonstrate that the cost of retrofitting properties can be considerable.

YHN's current Assets Management Strategy states there are long term targets to improve the energy performance of properties, setting a target of minimum Energy Performance Certificate (EPC) band B by 2050 to assist in the delivery of national carbon emission targets. The improved energy efficiency performance of the properties will also support the number of tenants who suffer Fuel Poverty, with band B seen as the level that "fuel poverty proofs" a property.

NCC and YHN undertook a programme of works to improve the housing stock which included:

- Installing over 1000 solar panel systems onto their homes
- Built over 300 new energy efficient homes
- Upgraded central heating boilers to high efficient systems
- Replaced single glazed windows with double glazed
- Communal area lighting upgraded to LEDs
- Underfloor insulation programme (Q-Bot)
- Fitting of heat meters on communal heating systems
- Energy advice service to help tenants manage fuel bills and reduce energy consumption.

SIFT asked YHN to provide feedback from customers on the negative or positive impacts of the solar panel project, however the feedback was not provided within the timescale of the scrutiny.

Future plans are to fit ground source heat pumps to a number of properties. This is currently in the planning phase and YHN are working with Eon on this pilot scheme.

Destination 2022 is YHN's Business Strategy for the 2019 to 2022 financial years ending on 31st March 2023. Part of this strategy covers the energy efficiency of the properties. One of the targets is to reach a minimum Standard Assessment Procedure (SAP) rating of 70 for all stock by 2022, which is band C.

However, the targets in this strategy do not align with other strategies that focus on environmental issues which are in place by either NCC or YHN.

YHN's current performance shows that less than 500 properties require additional works to achieve the first target of a minimum band D by 2025. However, 4.22% of the properties are unrated.

SIFT wanted to focus our attention on how to engage with tenants who will be impacted by carbon neutral pilot projects that will be rolled out.

Currently, NCC and YHN engage with tenants and customers using a wide range of methods such as:

- LGBT+ Virtual Group
- Mystery shoppers
- Newcastle Independent Tenants Voice (NiTV)
- Scrutiny Involvement For Tenants (SIFT)
- YHN Customer Service Committee
- Social media
- Discussion groups
- Surveys
- Consultations/Lets Talk Newcastle
- Letters
- Emails and more.

5. Benchmarking

We conducted a benchmarking exercise to investigate what methods other social landlords complete when engaging with their tenants.

We examined nine other providers' methods of engagement and empowerment. If the landlord uses the method on the left, there is a tick under the column for that landlord.

	Org 1	Org 2	Org 3	Org 4	Org 5	Org 6	Org 7	Org 8	Org 9
Letters	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Newsletters	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Surveys	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Comment cards	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Estate Inspections	✓	✓		✓		✓		✓	
Exhibitions	✓								
Show homes		✓							
Tenants' Forums	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Tenants' Panels	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Scrutiny Panels	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Community Events	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Fun Days	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	
Tenant Inspectors	✓			✓			✓	✓	
Mystery Shoppers		✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Tenants' Juries									
Conferences	✓	✓					✓	✓	✓
Surgeries	✓								
Street or block Focus Groups	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Scheme Meetings		✓							
Federations									
Training	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Reading Panels									
Consultations Calendar	✓	✓				✓	✓	✓	✓
Housing staff based in other organisation's premises	✓								
Tenant Management Organisations							✓		
Board Members	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Online Forums	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Online Surveys	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Virtual Groups	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Emails	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Social Media Forums	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

6. Interview with another Landlord

We conducted an interview with a member of staff from Thirteen Group regarding their ground source heat pumps and solar panel schemes and we wanted to ask a number of questions surrounding tenant engagement.

How many tenants who took part in the consultation signed up to the projects?

Thirteen had a high initial take up of tenants agreeing for the works to progress. They held two half day drop-in sessions with the equipment on display for tenants to view. Tenants received a full explanation of how they worked and how they would be fitted. Thirteen also installed the equipment into a void property and invited groups of residents in to view the pumps in action.

What were the overall benefits to tenants?

With the new equipment installed, this has saved a lot of tenants a substantial amount of money. Savings depend on what systems are removed and the EPC of the property but in general the savings are as below:

- Air Source Heat Pumps (ASHP) fitted storage heaters removed around 25-30% saving on electric bills for the end user
- ASHP fitted with PV Solar system (2kw/h) around 35-40% saving on electric bill for the end user.

The savings are dependent on having the right tariff and education package for the end user so they understand their system. An additional Thermostatic mixer shower against an electric shower is also a big saving with stored hot water. An ASHP and GSHP provides both heating and hot water.

What have you learnt from engaging with tenants?

Human behaviour does have an impact on energy efficiency. For example, tenants with non-thermostatic showers installed in their properties, when providing details of the length of time spent in the shower and times used a day, calculations showed they are spending approximately £400 a year on showers alone.

What was the best way of engaging with tenants?

Thirteen found letter drops, in combination with open days, to show the equipment working in a void property were the best ways of engaging with tenants.

7. Satisfaction and Complaints

2019 Formal	April	May	June	July	August	September	October	November	December
Damp/Mould		1	2	4	5	3	4		1
Heating		1	1	2	2	3		1	2
Water		1	1		4	2	2	3	
Total		3	4	6	11	8	6	4	3

2020 Formal	January	February	March	April	May	June
Damp/Mould	5	5	12	2		1
Heating	1		8		1	
Water	4	5	8	1	2	4
Total	10	10	17	3	2	6

Sadly, there is too little information here for us to make a judgement or notice any trends or patterns. However, this information is relevant to our next scrutiny and will be used to establish findings.

8. Mystery Shop

SIFT carried out a "mystery shop" and telephoned a few of the customer service Hubs. The question asked to each hub was; 'if I was going to buy an electric car, would I be able to have a charging point outside of my YHN property?' The mystery shopper was somewhat left confused and disappointed by the advice given.

- The first Housing Hub stated that the caller needed to look online for the form on YHN's website, but the caller could not find it.
- The second Hub said that as very few people in the area have sufficient income to need a charging hub and there was no need to stock any forms and suggested the caller contact the Civic Centre.
- The third Hub suggested that the caller email them and by return they would email back a form to be completed. They also said that they must state on the form who would be the qualified electrician (part P certified), why the caller needed the electric charging point, diagrams and specifications. They also said "not to do any works" until permission was granted or refused. If the application was successful the caller would either have to leave the charging point in at the property should they vacate it, or pay for its removal and any remedial works to make good the property.

SIFT would like to know what YHN's official policy on electric cars and charging points is.

9. Reducing tenants' carbon footprint

SIFT wanted to look at ways that tenants could be made more aware of the need to behave in ways which would reduce their carbon footprint.

On the 23rd March 2020, it was announced that measures to mitigate Covid-19 were to be tightened which included restrictions on freedom of movement. People were directed to stay at home except for essential purposes and to work from home if possible.

In May, a study by the University of East Anglia found that daily global CO₂ emissions during lockdown measures in early April fell by 17% and could lead to an annual decline of up to 7%. This has been attributed to the decrease in use of public transport and reduced industrial activity. However, for the carbon emissions to fall there needs to be continuing changes, not just via a lockdown.

Tenants can help reduce their carbon footprint on a property in a range of ways including:

- Replacing old equipment
- Turning off lights
- Turning equipment off when not in use
- Turning the thermostat down
- Take short showers instead of baths if possible
- Adjusting cooking methods if you can
- Easy DIY (draught excluders, placing reflective foil behind radiators)
- Getting the best deal from energy providers.

There are also a number of ways we can help reduce our CO₂ emissions outside of a property including:

- Cycling and walking more
- Conserving water
- Using public transport, rather than their own vehicle
- Switching to sustainable and clean energy
- Buying locally produced food
- Reuse, reduce, recycle bags we use for shopping etc.

Tenants should be encouraged to attend consultations and other events to have their say and continue to learn new ways to adapt their lives to help reduce their carbon footprint.



This report was prepared by:

Evette Callender

Fiona Lesley

Ashleigh Fullwood

Liviu Popoviciu

Tony Moore

Jana Williams

Andrew Perks

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Recommendation	Management Response	Proposed Actions	Timescale	Responsibility
<p>1. NCC's and YHN's strategies which aim to reduce carbon or decrease fuel poverty should have aligned targets and timescales.</p>				
<p>2. A publicity campaign to make tenants aware of how they can reduce carbon in their homes should be launched.</p>				
<p>3. Explore other appropriate methods other landlords have used to involve and empower tenants.</p>				
<p>4. Review the current Re-let Standard to consider fitting showers and increasing insulation.</p>				



Recommendation	Management Response	Proposed Actions	Timescale	Responsibility
5. Promote the role of the Energy Services Team internally to staff and to tenants.				
6. YHN's policy on electric cars and charging points should be made available on its website.				