

Do the service charges for caretaking reflect the actual service received?

1. Why we chose to scrutinise this topic

The caretaking service is provided to approximately 4,000 customers of YHN who live in multi-storey tower blocks. Each customer pays £14.44 per week to receive the service.

As this service can make an impact on customers' finances SIFT wished to explore how customers find out what they are paying for and if they are satisfied with the service.

2. Scope of the Review

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

- The activities caretakers undertake and compare these against job descriptions
- Assess how customers find out about the service
- Consider the policies and procedures relating to caretaking
- Assess how YHN measure activity and cost service charges accordingly
- Recommend changes to policy and practice where required.

3. How we scrutinised the Caretaking Service

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

- Briefing by the service lead
- Desktop Review
- Compared the levels of the old service against the new service
- Carried out a Caretaker Focus Group
- Carried out a Customer Focus Group
- Participated in a Work Shadowing exercise.

4. How the changes were implemented

In May 2019, YHN implemented the Caretaking Service which replaced the service previously known as the Concierge Service. They now have a team of 50 caretakers who ensure blocks are kept clean, safe and tidy.

Pre 2013, only a handful of blocks had Concierge on site 24 hours per day monitoring CCTV. Staff were unable to leave their lodges and cleaning was carried out separately by additional staff.

In 2013, following an extensive consultation period, the Concierge Service implemented new ways of working which included the centralisation of intercoms and CCTV which meant staff were no longer required in lodges. The Concierge workforce were split into two teams, dayshift who carried out the cleaning functions in the blocks and a response team who worked 24/7 and carried out tasks such as unblocking chutes and check lifts are in working order.

In the summer of 2018, a customer consultation started with a postal survey and drop-in sessions for every block. The proposal was to move towards caretakers working weekdays, with an option for emergency cover. Eighty percent of customers agreed with this new approach.

Staff consultation followed with the outcome being to move Caretakers working Monday to Friday, retaining a 24/7 team for emergency/out of hours work.

Following extensive recruitment the new service was launched. Events were held for customers to meet their Caretakers in two phases. Phase one was held in the summer and phase two in the autumn. Some of the feedback gathered from customers at the consultation events was implemented at this time, for example, having notice boards for information, including pictures of the Caretakers and their mobile phone numbers.

Caretakers no longer have cleaning schedules; this enables the Caretaker to prioritise tasks and free up time to spend on customer requests. Caretakers also no longer offer to hold spare keys but they can refer customers to Ostara for assistance.

5. Overview of SIFT's Findings

Information was gathered during the two focus groups, one for Caretakers and one for customers. It became evident that generally customers do not know the range of services which Caretakers can offer. Caretakers told us that the range of activities they get involved in includes putting together flat pack furniture, changing light bulbs, which previously they were not allowed to do, and changing toilet seats (which is the responsibility of customers). Information about this range of activity has not been communicated to customers.

SIFT would like to see the launch of a publicity campaign to make customers aware of the type of tasks Caretakers can get involved in.

We asked the Caretakers if anything needed to change about the way the service is delivered. They responded with a statement about requesting tools for tasks such as gardening, which can take up to two weeks for the equipment to be delivered. By that time gardens have become overgrown, or the weather might have changed drastically and it is frustrating waiting to make a start on the job.

Caretakers also stated that sometimes they felt that they are not being listened to, because they have to ask three or four times before anything is done about the issue at hand. This can be very frustrating for them because it causes delays in the work they want to deliver.

SIFT feel that an audit of communication flow should be carried out so that requests for tools, equipment and action are implemented more effectively.

Our final question to the Caretakers asked if there was anything else they would like to add and they responded that they wished customers knew a little bit more about the Service Charge they pay. The Caretakers believe that customers think that all of the Service Charge is just paying for their Caretaking Service, which simply is not the case. The Service Charge covers many other aspects of service, such as lift maintenance and repair, door entry system and communal lighting.

SIFT believe that the Service Charge should be listed as 'Service Charge' on bills and in the tenancy agreement. The range of services should be itemised so that customers know exactly what they are paying for. Evidence from both Focus Groups, and the subsequent survey, indicated that itemised Service Charge bills were the change that both Caretakers and customers would like to see implemented.

Evidence gathered during the scrutiny exercise indicated that overall the majority of customers expressed their satisfaction with their Caretaker service. They stated that their Caretakers are very helpful, friendly and do their jobs well. One or two comments were made that it sometimes takes too long to get tasks completed and that Caretakers are not around when you need them.

The main criticism of the service was that the out of hours Rapid Response and weekend service was poor compared to the weekday service in that, amongst other things, out of order lifts went unreported and rubbish bags were not moved. Customers felt that the out of hours service was unresponsive and not value for money. They did feel that the weekday service was value for money.

One of the main reasons why customers felt there is a difference in the level of service is that most customers do not know they can contact the Rapid Response team to resolve issues. Those that do know about the Rapid Response team felt that the Enquiry Centre staff 'prioritise' which calls they feel need doing straight away and those that can wait until the daytime Caretakers start work.

SIFT suggest that all calls to the Enquiry Centre requesting the service of Rapid Response Team are passed on immediately. Members of the Rapid Response Team can then prioritise which task needs to be actioned in which order without the Enquiry Centre staff needing to make decisions about priority.



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The report is dedicated to the memory of Tony French, SIFT Vice Chair

Acknowledgements

Members of SIFT would like to thank the following people for their help and co-operation in compiling this report.

From Your Homes Newcastle

Claire Lyddon

John Welford

Ian Gallagher

John Bell

Emily Potts

And members of the Caretaking Team

From Newcastle City Council

Fiona Dodsworth

From Engage Associates

Eileen Adams

... and ...

All tenants who participated in contributing their views

March 2020



Recommendation	Management Response	Proposed Actions	Timescale	Responsibility
<p>1. Promote the new service, as there is confusion about what new tasks the Caretakers can carry out and help they can provide to Customers.</p>				
<p>2. Communication to be improved between Caretakers and their team leaders/management.</p>				
<p>3. Improve the speed for the delivery of equipment and tasks requested by Caretakers.</p>				



Recommendation	Management Response	Proposed Actions	Timescale	Responsibility
<p>4. Service Charge statements should be itemised and the term 'concierge' should be removed from rent statements and the tenancy agreement.</p>				
<p>5. All calls to the Enquiry Centre should be passed on to the Rapid Response Team immediately without Enquiry Centre Staff prioritising.</p>				
<p>6. The Rapid Response team need to complete tasks in accordance with their job description.</p>				