

What lessons have been learned by YHN and NCC about service delivery and engagement during the pandemic in the period between March and October 2020?

1. Why we chose to scrutinise this topic

SIFT members wanted to understand how service delivery and tenant engagement had to change due to the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown. What lessons had been learned as a consequence of the changes to service delivery?

The first lockdown period started on 23rd March 2020 and ended on 4th July 2020. The second lockdown did not start until 5th November 2020 and therefore is outside the scope of this scrutiny.

2. Scope of the Review

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

- To identify how housing staff changed and reviewed the ways they deliver service
- To assess the different ways of working
- To assess what staff and tenants have learned about service delivery
- To recommend, where appropriate changes to the service.

3. How we scrutinised this service area

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

- Desktop review of Consumer Standards and Complaints about service
- Briefing by service head
- Benchmarking other organisations' activity
- Staff Focus Group via Zoom
- YHN Customer Survey Results Review
- Final Review of Evidence.
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4. Desktop Review of Consumer Standards and Complaints about Service

There are four Regulatory Consumer Standards, namely:

- a) **Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard**
This standard includes required outcomes with regard to:
 - Customer service, choice and complaints
 - Involvement and Empowerment
 - Understanding and responding to diverse needs of tenants

- b) **Home Standard**
This standard includes required outcomes with regard to:
 - Quality of accommodation
 - Repairs and Maintenance

- c) **Tenancy Standard**
This standard includes required outcomes with regard to:
 - Allocations and mutual exchange
 - Tenure

- d) **Neighbourhood and Community Standard**
This standard includes required outcomes with regard to:
 - Neighbourhood management
 - Local area co-operation
 - Anti-social behaviour.

All four Standards are directly related to service delivery by the Landlord and the Managing Agent.

In terms of the Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard NCC and YHN have managed to keep their key panels involved via digital media through SIFT and the Customer Service Committee. YHN has continued to work with customers using Chit Chat and is producing regular copies of Homes and People.

The Home Standard has been more complex to comply with as repairs were limited to 'Emergency' levels only during the first lockdown. There is evidence from YHN's Chit Chat that some customers were unhappy with the level of service on repairs.

The Tenancy Standard could not be fully complied with as allocations and mutual exchanges were suspended during the majority of the first lockdown.

There is evidence from YHN's Chit Chat and the Staff Focus Group (see Section 8) that the Neighbourhood and Community Standard has been difficult to comply with in terms of neighbourhood management and tackling anti-social behaviour.

SIFT members asked to see details of complaints about service from the lockdown period until the end of November 2020, but also to see details of complaints from the

same period in 2019 in order to compare levels. It should be noted that the system of collating details about complaints changed during late 2019 so a direct comparison can only be inferred.

Only direct complaints about Housing Services were considered, complaints around other aspects of service were discounted.

Nature of Complaint March – November 2020	Housing Services
Complaint about a member of staff	13
Delay in providing service	12
Dissatisfaction with policy	3
Poor quality of Service	15
Total	43

Nature of Complaint March – November 2019	Housing Services
Complaint about a member of staff	10
Delay in providing service	6
Dissatisfaction with policy	3
Poor quality of Service	9
Total	29

Not all of the complaints from both years were upheld. Thirty-seven percent of complaints were upheld in 2020 and 28 percent upheld in 2019. The figures from 2020 represent an increase in complaints of around 67 percent from that of the

previous year. Is the increase as a result of service being delivered in a different way? From the figures it cannot be really determined; an analysis of the content of each complaint may have provided more evidence on which to base a judgement.

5. Briefing by Service Lead

Mel Smith who is the Senior Manager from YHN's Housing Services delivered a briefing for SIFT members. She explained how YHN changed their way of working from March 2020 to October 2020.

In March 2020, staff moved to working from home and equipment was rolled out to support the staff, including phones and laptops.

Tyne and Wear Homes lettings were suspended in line with Government guidelines and an Emergency Housing Panel was created which would oversee emergency housing applications, such as those fleeing domestic violence.

Tenancy and Estate Management continued via emails, phone, video calls and home visits for emergencies and safeguarding reasons.

In April through to June, YHN started a programme of welfare calls to vulnerable customers. Calls were made to 26,300 customers through this programme and extra daily or weekly calls were made by Support and Progression and Housing Plus teams. Tyne and Wear Homes reopened in late June, general lettings and mutual exchanges restarted and video tours of properties started.

Through July and August, a customer survey was completed on the impact of Covid on service delivery (see Section ??). Estates based activities also restarted which included dealing with untidy gardens, fencing issues and fly tipping.

In September, YHN started to revisit customers where it was necessary, observing social distancing and wearing the appropriate Personal Protective Equipment (PPE).

Although November is outside the scope of this scrutiny it is interesting to note that a Christmas Campaign was launched which identified around 14,000 customers who were clinically or financially vulnerable. Clinically vulnerable were classed as those over 60 and flagged on Northgate (which is a database holding confidential details of customers) with a vulnerability. Financially vulnerable were classed as new Universal Credit customers (in the last 12 months) and those with one or more failed direct debit (in the last nine months). Voicescape was used to initiate contact with those customers.

Also initiated were:

- Automated phone call asking if the customer is okay given the further lockdown restrictions
- An option was given to acknowledge they are okay or to request a call back for further support.

In total there was 13,711 calls made through this campaign.

6. Benchmarking

SIFT explored how a number of other social housing providers delivered service through the pandemic to establish what changes they have made to the way they work.

Service Provider 1. Carried out thousands of welfare calls to tenants to check if they were okay. The service provider stated that tenants have been happy to receive the calls. Staff also communicated with tenants in other ways for those that did not have a phone, for example contacted a near neighbour.

Service Provider 2. Staff were redeployed in other areas of service, one example being that the CEO of the organisation would help with cleaning communal staff areas.

Service Provider 3. Staff helped tenants by delivering food parcels and medicines and set up a Covid hotline.

Service Provider 4. Organised events for tenants, for example, sunflower growing competition where seeds were provided by the Association.

Service Provider 5. Prioritised staff to ensure they received the right IT equipment.

Service Provider 6. Tenant board meetings were held online through Zoom/Teams, however there needed to be training organised for those who were less familiar with these forms of communicating, which resulted in tenant boards not meeting.

Service Provider 7. One council was exploring the idea of using special technology to support tenants in their sheltered schemes as residents might struggle with standard IT equipment due to mobility and motor problems.

Service Provider 9. Updating tenants through all forms of communication in regards to new information for them. With these intense forms of communication, this has allowed staff more time to be able to record and update data on their tenant pool.

Service Provider 10. Have worked closely with other organisations who worked with the police to help tenants suffering from domestic abuse, as well as collaborating with local food banks.

Service Provider 11. Found it difficult to deal with the increase of complaints made in regards to anti-social behaviour but staff have taken on a supportive approach in order to try and resolve these issues.

Service Provider 12. Trained staff and gave recognition to staff in order to help them also deal with the new challenges from working from home. This was conducted in various ways such as monthly shout outs, etc for each team.

7. Staff Focus Group

SIFT spoke to a number of YHN front line staff by a Zoom Focus Group Session. Members asked a number of questions to understand how staff have changed their ways of working during the pandemic.

The key findings from the staff focus group are as follows:

Staff conducted welfare calls to vulnerable customers.

Some staff were redeployed to look at emergency allocations after which time they returned to their normal roles, but largely working from home.

The main difficulties were working out how to deliver services and juggling home and work life and also for many members of staff, delivering home schooling for their children whilst also delivering YHN services.

Staff found that after a while they could 'work smarter' by starting earlier than normal or working late, for example having a break around teatime and then working in the evening. Several members of the group stated that they did not want to go back to working as it was and that they liked the flexible approach to working from home.

A lot of misdirected traffic, in that customers were directed to the wrong team or member of staff, which was frustrating for the customer and staff.

YHN Covid response team partnered up with Citylife Line to offer support on a number of customers' needs, for example financial support, food supply, etc.

There were issues around delivering the service when staffs' children were present in the room as quite often sensitive conversations with customers needed to be held and they did not want their children to be exposed to inappropriate information.

Customers suffering from domestic violence were helped.

YHN worked with other agencies such as Women's Refuge and Northumbria Police.

Staff were supported to work from home by receiving the necessary equipment, for example, laptops, phones and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). WhatsApp groups were set up to provide personal and work support. There were also Wednesday afternoon Teams meetings, which staff could drop in to.

PPE for staff was delivered to their home if they could not get to the distribution point, however, they felt they quite often had to be resourceful.

The Compliance Team has continued to carry out emergency visits during the pandemic.

Another issue with home working is that not all staff took their annual leave, which began to build up, as did flexi time. Staff needed to be quite disciplined about taking time off.

Staff discovered that the service was 'quite paper based' and that the correct piece of paper for an aspect of service was not necessarily found where it was expected to be. Staff stated that a lot of time was wasted trying to find the correct form, for example, a member of staff needed a disclaimer form for overcrowding and it took a lot of effort to resource it. Staff stated that there should be a central place for all paperwork until every form was digitised.

Staff stated that the estates will be suffering, for example, gardens may become unkempt, as not checking on them meant that things will inevitably slide. YHN had to deliver a responsive service during lockdown rather than the normal proactive approach. More planning of work activities needed to be carried out.

Some staff lived quite a distance away from the area that they managed so did not get to the area very often. One member of the group does not drive and found that they had to plan their activities around the opportunity of getting a lift to their patch.

A disadvantage of working from home is that you do not necessarily pick up if a customer is struggling when you do not meet them face-to-face in their home.

The provision of work mobiles is great however calls could come in when a member of staff was on annual leave or during the weekend. One member of the group stated that a text message about child abuse had come into their phone during the weekend when the phone was switched off, and this was a cause for concern.

8. YHN Customer Survey Results

YHN conducted a survey of customers' views on service delivery during the first lockdown, to which 1,087 responses were received, using a variety of methods, for example, email and website, a text link and through Homes and People.

YHN's customers are approximately 60% female and 40% male. The responses received largely reflected this split of 61% female and 39% male, which shows a balanced level of responses from both sexes.

The vast majority of customers (60.8 percent) stated that they wished to be contacted by phone followed by those wanting to be contacted by email (at 20.4 percent). Only 8.7 percent of people wanted face-to-face contact at YHN's Hubs.

A question was asked about whether or not customers would be happy to contact a member of staff directly on their mobile number: 68.4 percent of customers said they would be happy to.

Customers stated that they would be happy to access YHN's services digitally in the future (55.5 percent).

When asked if customers would like to be able to contact staff at a weekend for matters of anti-social behaviour 88.1 percent responded that they would.

A key question on the survey asked about staff contact during lockdown. Fifty-six percent of responders stated that they felt reassured by staff compared to 21.9 percent who stated that they had not felt reassured.

When asked if customers felt supported by YHN during lockdown 18.4 percent stated that 'staff attitude' was the main reason that they felt unsupported.

11. Conclusions

SIFT recognised that it is extremely difficult to evaluate any organisation's performance during an unprecedented and unforeseen event such as the pandemic. The way that staff delivered services during lockdown meant that not all aspects of the Regulatory Consumer Standards could be met, for example, carrying out a comprehensive repairs service. NCC and YHN, however should be congratulated for enabling their main involvement and empowerment panels (SIFT and CSC) to continue to function effectively.

From April 2020, 26,300 phone calls were made to customers checking on welfare. SIFT feels that the communication to customers could have been enhanced if advertisements about service delivery were placed in other media, for example, in the Chronicle, Journal and on local radio.

The benchmarking exercise illustrated that a number of social landlords were being as inventive as possible to ensure that services continued to be provided.

It emerged from the Staff Focus Group that details on customers' vulnerability are held centrally on Northgate. YHN categorise vulnerability in two ways: first by age, that is those over 60 with a defined vulnerability and those new claimants of Universal Credit or those on UC that miss a rent payment. There remained, however a number of people who would class themselves as vulnerable but were not identified as such on YHN's system. SIFT members feel that work should be carried out to clarify categories of vulnerability and then ask customers to identify themselves as vulnerable or not in need of additional support.

The Customer Survey highlighted that the majority of customers would like to be contacted by phone and very few used the Hubs to access service. Customers also stated that they would like to phone staff using the staff members' mobiles.



Customers would also like staff to be able to investigate anti-social behaviour during the weekend. There will inevitably be a backlog of work to catch up on once the final lockdown ceases, for example repairs and the condition of the environment.

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Recommendation	Management Response	Proposed Actions	Timescale	Responsibility
1. Work should be carried out to clarify categories of vulnerability and then ask customers to identify themselves as vulnerable or not in need of additional support.				
2. Details of how the backlog of work will be carried out should be publicised to customers.				
3. The feasibility of staff working to tackle ASB during a weekend should be carried out.				



Recommendation	Management Response	Proposed Actions	Timescale	Responsibility
<p>4. YHN should explore a more flexible way of delivering service, for example a combination of working from hub, home and having a physical presence on estates.</p>				
<p>5. YHN and NCC should detail the lessons learned from delivering service during the pandemic and develop a continuity plan for future interruptions to service.</p>				