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**Is the housing application form easy to complete for most people?**

**July 2019**

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**Summary**

Members of Scrutiny, Involvement For Tenants (SIFT) carried out a scrutiny exercise to assess ‘Is the housing application form easy to complete for most people?’

SIFT used a number of scrutiny tools to gather evidence for the scrutiny exercise, for example a Focus Group and Mystery Shopping, and followed key lines of enquiry.

**The main findings include:**

|  |
| --- |
| * Staff are either unaware that a paper application still exists or are reluctant to offer that option * Staff do generally offer to help applicants with the online application * Applicants cannot save sections of the online form and return to it later, meaning that they have to complete the process in one sitting, which is not always convenient * 15 minutes to complete each section of the form is not long enough for many * The application form complies with the Regulatory Tenancy Standard. However, one element of the Standard is efficiency, but SIFT’s judgement is that it is not efficient * The time applicants have to wait before being told they could bid is too long, particularly for people who are homeless or sofa surfing * Vulnerable applicants should be able to apply face-to-face with a member of staff’s help.   **SIFT’s main recommendations are:**   * Staff should be reminded that there is a paper-based application form and that they should issue this to people requesting the paper version by handing it to the person or send it by post * Applicants requesting to complete the application by telephone should be able to do so, or the invitation to do so should be removed from the paper version * The online application should allow the applicant to save and return to the application so that it is efficient * The time allowed to complete each section of the application should be extended from 15 minutes * The time applicants have to wait before they are allowed to bid on properties should be reduced and set as a Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) * If applicants identify as vulnerable they should be offered a session where they can complete the application form face-to-face with a member of staff. |

**1. Introduction**

This first scrutiny report of the Financial Year 2019-20 was produced by the Tenant-led Scrutiny Pool.

The Scrutiny Pool’s name is SIFT – Scrutiny, Involvement For Tenants – which accurately describes what we do, that is, sifting through information to look for evidence from which to analyse service provision and recommend change.

**2. Scope of the Scrutiny Exercise**

The scope of the scrutiny exercise is to investigate if the Tyne and Wear Homes application form is easy for most people to complete both online and in the paper version. The purpose of this scrutiny exercise is to recommend, where appropriate changes to the paper and online application form.

This report details the findings and recommendations of this scrutiny exercise, which took place during May to July 2019.

**3. Methodology**

There are a variety of tools which can be used to scrutinise services, performance and governance. The tools selected on this scrutiny exercise included:

* Briefing by service head
* Desktop review of relevant policies and procedures
* Benchmarking of other organisations’ application forms
* Work shadowing
* Feedback from Disability North staff
* Applicant Focus Group
* Mystery Shopping
* Completing the ‘dummy’ online application form
* Assessment of compliance against the Tenancy Standard.

The Key Lines of Enquiry we pursued included:

* Reviewing the Regulatory Tenancy Standard
* Exploring the application process, including completing a ‘dummy’ application form
* Considering the diverse needs of customers including, methods of communication and other ways of completing the application other than self-serve
* Identifying the number of applicant completion rates
* Looking at the average length of time it takes to complete the application
* Investigating sections of the application form which are difficult to complete and explore the reasons why they are difficult.
* Exploring what level of support and advice is available to help complete the form
* Investigating if there are different methods of applying
* Benchmarking against other Choice-Based Lettings sub-regional partnerships and other application processes, for example, mortgage application, insurance comparison site and benefit applications, etc.

**4. The Service Briefing**

Fiona Dodsworth, Housing Partnership Officer delivered the service briefing to members of SIFT and went into detail across four areas.

**4.1 Tyne and Wear Homes Partnership**

The Tyne and Wear Homes Partnership commenced its service in 2012, although the partnership itself was formed in 2002. It is the sub-regional Choice-Based lettings (CBL) partnership for Gateshead, Newcastle upon Tyne, North Tyneside and South Tyneside.

The Tyne and Wear Homes Partnership is made up of the four councils, their housing providers (for example, Your Homes Newcastle) and Housing Associations. A full list of partner organisations is available on the Tyne and Wear Homes website.

The other sub-regional CBL partnerships in the North East are Compass, which covers the Tees Valley, and Durham Key Options, which covers County Durham and Teesdale. Sunderland and Northumberland are not in a CBL partnership, although Northumberland do work in partnership with Housing Associations.

**4.2 Tyne and Wear Homes Service**

Tyne and Wear Homes offers applicants a single point of access to apply and bid for social housing in the four areas.

YHN provide the Tyne and Wear Homes service in Newcastle and process applications for applicants whose preferred area is Newcastle. Other Authorities use the application form to assess the applicant for housing in their area.

Most applications are completed online. YHN encourage customers to apply in this way and can provide help if this is required. A paper application can be issued, however from the evidence collected in the Mystery Shopping exercise staff in the hubs state that there is no longer a paper application form.

Once applicants have applied to join Tyne and Wear Homes by completing the household registration, they can then complete a social housing application form.

Applicants can also use the Tyne and Wear Homes website to apply for a mutual exchange or a garage and get information on other housing options and services by completing a housing options plan. The website is hosted by Civica (formally Abritas).

**4.3 Tyne and Wear Homes Application Form**

The Tyne and Wear Homes application form collects information from applicants about their circumstances and housing needs.

Once the customer has submitted their application form, YHN verify the applicant’s circumstances and assess their needs using the Council’s Lettings and Allocations Policy. YHN will advise in writing if their application has been accepted (sometimes referred to as ‘made active’). Once their application has been made active, the applicant can start bidding for properties.

The four Councils and their housing providers need to reach a consensus when making changes to the application form. The online form was first reviewed in early 2017, with the aim of shortening it. This resulted in the removal of questions which did not establish the applicant’s circumstances and used to assess their housing needs. The form was reviewed again in late 2018 and the new version will be available shortly.

**4.4 Issues to note**

Some things cannot be tailored to meet the partnership’s requirements as they are standard features of the IT system. For example, the Partnership knows that some applicants just complete the household registration, assuming this is the social housing application, which means that their application is not registered. Recently 4,500 household registrations were deleted from the system as an application form was not completed. Most people use the website to apply for social housing, rather than completing a paper-based application form. However, the household registration cannot be removed as this gives customers access to other services offered on the website, for example access to services supporting mutual exchange, garages and information on other housing options.

To ensure that the Tyne and Wear Homes servicee does not discriminating against particular groups some equality questions are only used for monitoring purposes.

The application form and accompanying Privacy Statement must meet the requirements of the Data Protection Act 2018.

**5. Desktop Review of Policy, Guidance Document and Privacy Statement**

Members of SIFT completed a desktop review of the Lettings and Allocations Policy, Guidance document for staff, privacy statement and the paper application form, which raised a number of questions and inconsistencies that we needed clarification on.

One of the conflicts we noted was that the Lettings and Allocation policy states that an address history of the previous five years needs to be provided, however the paper application form asks for a six-year history.

It is to be noted that there is a typographical error on page 34 of the Lettings and Allocation policy, it reads ‘residence’ but should read ‘resides.’

**6. Benchmarking**

A member of SIFT benchmarked the Tyne and Wear Homes application form against that of eight other housing providers from around the country. Overall, the majority of the application forms are easy to complete, however at least two of the providers also only allow 15 minutes to complete each section and those forms are hosted using the same system software as Tyne and Wear Homes.

Blackpool Coastal Housing are an Arms Length Management Organisation for Blackpool Council and its Choice-Based Lettings partnership is called My Home Choice Flyde Coast. Their website is of good quality and has lots of information, including a video. The application form appears simple and straightforward.

Edinburgh’s Choice-based lettings scheme appeared to offer the best system, called Edindex. This allows an applicant to download, print and fill in the application form as well as completing it online. Applicants are able to contact staff, either by telephone or email and they will also send out a paper application by post.

**7. Work Shadowing**

Two members of SIFT attended a work shadowing event to understand the process staff follow when dealing with Tyne and Wear Homes applications.

YHN deal with all applications from people who want to live in the Newcastle area. If an applicant wants to live in Gateshead, North Tyneside or South Tyneside, those applications are sent on to those authorities.

All four Local Authorities have local connection criteria in their Allocations Policies and will ask applicants to prove how they have a local connection to the area. This does not stop applicants with no local connection to the area from applying and being considered, they just won’t be awarded a priority band. For example, applicants with no local connection to Newcastle can only be awarded the lowest Band (Band D), even if they have a priority housing need.

As also explained during the service briefing, if changes need to be made to the application form, there has to be a consensus between all four authorities before that can go ahead.

The member of staff was asked how they process paper application forms and SIFT were told that staff do not encourage paper applications at all and they have to be completed online, however, applications can also be made over the phone.

The application process asks the applicant to produce a wide range of personal information throughout the application and to provide ID, including National Insurance number, photographic ID and a reference.

Those applicants who are homeless can have all the information sent to their local jobcentre. Help is available across a wide range of topics, for example debt advice, tenancy rights advice, benefits advice, etc.

**8. Disability North Feedback**

SIFT asked Disability North to review the paper-based application form. The following comments were received.

The form seems user-friendly, with clearly stated instructions, clearly defined options and the ability to change the size of the text for those with visual impairments. It is also clear that help via telephone or email is available from staff at the Housing Hubs.

In the welfare benefits section on page 16 it may be worth adding “Attendance Allowance“ to the list. This is a disability benefits similar to Disability Living Allowance or Personal Independence Payment, but for people over 65.

Also, on page 17 Closomat WC is listed as an option for adaptations. Closomat is the name of the supplier, and there are also a number of other organisations that provide similar products for example, Geberit, Armitage Shanks. It may be worth considering changing Closomat WC to “Accessible toilet“ to allow for all the different makes and suppliers.

**9. Applicant Focus Group**

SIFT held an applicant focus group to hear first-hand the views of those who have applied through Tyne and Wear Homes in the past two years. YHN promoted this event through their social media channels such as Facebook and Twitter on our behalf due to General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR). Five applicants participated in the Focus Group.

We asked a total of seven questions and the participants gave us their views.

**What is the main reason you are applying for housing?**

* Family breakdown
* Kicked out by parents
* Relationship breakdown
* Financial circumstances.

**Did you apply online or with help in an office?**

* Online
* I was helped by my support worker
* I struggled with the form even though I am IT savvy and when I asked for help, I was told to go away.

**If you got help in an office, do you think you were supported well?**

* No. I was told to bring in evidence/ID with me then I was told it wasn’t needed
* There was some miscommunication.

**Did you think that all of the questions in the application were relevant?**

* Religion shouldn’t matter when applying for housing
* Adding a box to input your own personal comments would be good. That way you have a chance to make the application more personal and give an explanation around personal circumstances and why you are applying.

**Can you remember how long it took you to complete the application?**

* 3 months from start to finish
* 20 minutes now I am more used to it but you can wait weeks, sometimes months for a response
* 15 minutes is not long enough to complete each section.

**Did any sections time out when you were completing the application?**

* Can’t remember
* Too little time to put in all the details they are asking for
* Answers often don’t save so the page has to be refreshed and put in again.

**Have you got any other comments about the application process?**

**Good**

* Bidding process is ok

**Bad**

* Was told to go away by a member of staff – they don’t seem to care until you’re at breaking point
* It’s hard to find a number to ring for assistance
* Not all advertised properties have photos for you to view.

**In an Ideal World**

* You should be allowed to bid on more than three properties a week
* Couch surfing needs to be recognised as being homeless
* Workshops could be held to raise awareness on how to complete the application form and to understand the process
* A flagging system in place to identify those who are in a vulnerable position
* A low rate/cheap removals scheme to help those in genuine need of assistance to move into a new property.

**10. Mystery Shopping**

We carried out three mystery shopping exercises to see if applicants could access a paper copy of the application form.

**Mystery Shop One**

A member of SIFT called into a Housing Hub and asked for a paper copy of the application form. The woman on reception said, “We do not have paper copies.” She phoned a colleague who also said that YHN does not have paper copies but that she would come down and show the person how to do it on the computer.

**Mystery Shop Two**

Another member of SIFT went into a different Housing Hub and asked for an application form. He was told that there is no such thing as a paper application form and that it was all done online now. He said that he couldn’t use a computer and would there be someone to assist him, he felt that the staff were very helpful and they were prepared to assist him there and then.

**Mystery Shop Three**

A member of SIFT telephoned a housing hub and asked for an application form to be sent out to them. They were told that there is no longer a paper form but if they called into the office help to complete the online form would be given.

**Mystery Shop Four**

The paper-based application form states on the front page, ‘Alternatively, you can telephone or email using the contact details provided at the back of this form.’

SIFT understood this to mean that people could phone up the number and complete the form over the phone. So to test this assumption a member of SIFT used the phone number listed at the back of the application.

They asked whether it would be at all possible for a member of staff to assist them to complete a Tyne and Wear Homes application form over the phone, and if it was at all possible, what information did they need to have with them.

The staff member told me that they did not assist to complete a housing application form over the phone, but that instead, I had the option of going to the City Library, or a local housing office where a member of staff would be more than happy to go through one with me.

I then asked whether I needed to bring any documentation with me in order to complete the application form, and the staff member said that I needed to bring the following; proof of address, expenditure information for proof of income, references from the landlord and some photographic ID.

Overall the conclusions from the Mystery Shopping exercise is that staff do not offer a paper-based application form, or complete forms for applicants via the telephone, which was an assumption of Disability North, whose representative thought was helpful. YHN staff must be unaware that a paper-based application form exists or their practice is to encourage everyone to use the online version. However, staff consistently offered help to the Mystery Shoppers to complete an online form.

**11. Completing the Dummy Application Form**

Members of SIFT completed a ‘dummy’ version of an application form which was reviewed by Tyne and Wear Homes Partnership in May 2019. The following are SIFT’s comments on the form and a section of the report which explored applying for a mortgage online to compare and contrast ease of use.

**Page 3 Gender**

The options to tick are: Male, Female, Transgender Female/male. Why so few options? According to a recent Google search with the question ‘How many genders are there?’ There are up to about 58 different gender options, for example, Agender, Androgyne, Androgynous, Bigender, Cis, etc. Perhaps there should be a drop down menu for this in order to take account of the fact that there are so many more options under this category in our modern society.

**Page 7 Address history**

The question states ‘Please give a 6 year history for all household members. Where you held a tenancy, we may require a reference to (the word ‘be’ should be added into this sentence at this point) completed by the landlord. We will ask you to explain any gaps’.

The fact that previously, they requested the applicant to supply a fiveyear history of addresses has changed to six. SIFT wondered why this was, and felt that it could be challenging for applicants who are perhaps homeless, sofa surfing, staying at friends temporarily, or even sadly fleeing from domestic violence.

**Page 12 Armed Forces**

The question states ‘Have you served or currently serving in the Armed Forces?’ SIFT thinks that this question should read ‘Have you served, or **are you** currently serving in the Armed Forces?’

**Section D – Employment and Financial Information**

This now does include the Universal Credit option. However, the following question which reads ‘Do you and/or joint applicant has (should say have) assets/savings over £50,000, yet, SIFT’s feedback from the recent work shadowing exercise that was undertaken, revealed that both Gateshead and North Tyneside councils have an asset/savings threshold of £100,000.

**Sexual Orientation**

Similarly to the limited options regarding Gender on page 3, it appears as if there simply are not enough options in order to answer this question either. There is such a range of sexual orientation in diverse Britain, such as; androsexual, aromantic, asexual, bicurious, bisexual, etc, that the current selections on the application form do not reflect this. Perhaps a dropdown menu is a better option for this question.

**Page 20 Application Confirmation**

Under the declaration section, the second from last paragraph which begins ‘I understand that it is a criminal offence for any person… The offence is punishable by a fine up to the level 5 or imprisonment’. Level 5 should be explained or re-worded.

Also, there is no timeframe offered at the end of the application form given to the applicant. For example, how long will they need to wait for YHN to contact them to find out whether or not their housing application form has been successful, 2 weeks? 3 weeks? etc.

SIFT felt quite strongly that vulnerable applicants should be able to apply face to face with a member of staff.

**Completing an online Mortgage Application**

To enable a comparison with the online application to be made with other types of online application SIFT explored how easy it was to access and complete a Halifax Building Society Mortgage Application form. The process was straightforward, not timed and personalised the application on the second page, that is the site started to use the name of the person SIFT had entered. At the end of the process the applicant was invited in to the office to discuss the application and asked to bring certain documents with them, for example, salary slips and proof of identity.

**12. Tenancy Standard Compliance Assessment**

The application form largely complies with the Standard, however in only one respect it does not comply in that it is not efficient. If the definition of efficient is achieving maximum productivity with minimum wasted effort or expense then the online application does not achieve this as many people think that completing the Registration is the application and abandon the process after that point.

**13. Findings**

The Mystery Shopping exercise demonstrated that staff are either unaware that a paper application still exists or are reluctant to offer that option. Staff do, however largely offer to help applicants with the online version.

Applicants cannot save sections of the online form and return to it later, meaning that they have to complete the process in one sitting, which is not always convenient.

Evidence gathered during the Applicant Focus Group and from SIFT members completing the ‘dummy’ online application indicates that 15 minutes to complete each section of the form is not long enough for many people. The time does not take into account the ability and competence of the applicant to complete.

Further evidence from the Focus Group highlighted that applicants were often asked to bring into the Housing Hubs photographic identification, household bills and landlord references. Several people claimed that some of this material was often lost and they had to bring in further evidence. SIFT explored the idea of scanning in evidence and then emailing it to the Housing Hub. A simple free download application for a mobile phone such as ‘Turbo Scan’ could overcome this problem if YHN were satisfied to accept scans as proof of identity and personal circumstances.

In the ‘title’ section of the online form the dropdown box has a range of options including Canon, Bishop, etc. The paper version lists Mr, Mrs, Miss, Ms and Other (please state) which is a much more sensible list that perhaps could replace the online range of options.

The application form largely complies with the Regulatory Tenancy Standard, however in only one respect it does not comply in that it is not efficient. Navigating around the form is not efficient in that for example, if you say ‘no’ to question 5 making questions 6, 7, and 8 redundant you cannot jump to question 9.

Recently 4,500 Household Registrations were deleted from the system as an application form was not completed because some people thought the Registration was the application.

The evidence from the benchmarking exercise demonstrates that there are simpler online application forms in use by other organisations.

SIFT thought that the time applicants had to wait before being told they could bid was too long, particularly for people who are homeless or sofa surfing.

SIFT felt quite strongly that vulnerable applicants should be able to apply face to face with a member of staff’s help.

**Recommendations – Action Plan**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Recommendation** | **Management Response** | **Proposed Actions** | **Timescale** | **Responsibility** |
| 1. Staff should be reminded that there is a paper-based application form and that they should issue this to people requesting the paper version by handing it to the person or sending it by post |  |  |  |  |
| 1. Applicants requesting to complete the application by telephone should be able to do so, or the invitation to do so should be removed from the paper version |  |  |  |  |
| 1. The online application should allow the applicant to save and return to the application, improving efficiency |  |  |  |  |
| 1. The 15 minutes to complete each section of the application should be extended, If cost effective |  |  |  |  |
| 1. The time applicants have to wait before they are allowed to bid on properties should be reduced and set as a KPI |  |  |  |  |
| 1. If applicants identify as vulnerable they should be offered a session where they can complete the application form face-to-face with a member of staff |  |  |  |  |
| **Recommendation** | **Management Response** | **Proposed Actions** | **Timescale** | **Responsibility** |
| 1. The options for entering details of gender and sexuality should be modernised and offered in a ‘drop down’ box. The options for ‘title’ should be changed to come in line with the paper application, that is ‘Mr, Mrs, Miss, Ms, other, please state’ |  |  |  |  |
| 1. Applicants should be able to scan in required evidentiary documents and they should be informed that scanning applications are available for mobile phones |  |  |  |  |