



**An investigation in to how responsive  
Your Homes Newcastle Enquiry Centre  
staff are to requests for service**

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YHN Enquiry Centre staff

### **From Newcastle City Council**

Gwen Smith, Housing Partnership Officer

Ann Duffy, Housing Delivery Assistant

Matt Thornhill, Housing Policy and Information Officer

Luke Burton, Digital Development Manager

NCC's Call Centre Staff

**... and ...**

**All tenants who participated in contributing their views**

## Summary

Members of Scrutiny, Involvement For Tenants (SIFT) carried out a scrutiny exercise to assess the responsiveness of Your Homes Newcastle's (YHN) Enquiry Centre staff to tenants' requests for service.

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

The main findings included:

- Staff require a great deal of knowledge about an extensive range of subjects in order to be able to effectively handle the calls made by customers
- Staff often deal with emotive and complex issues without the benefit of professional counselling
- On the whole staff handle customers' calls well, and in an empathetic and problem-solving manner
- The IT systems staff use are complex and are not updated frequently enough to enable customers' queries to be handled comprehensively
- The data collected for performance monitoring is not sufficiently focused
- Housing staff do not always leave their contact details on tenants' telephone answer machines when responding to requests for service
- Housing staff do not always update the IT system upon resolution of a customer's request for service
- The IT systems are complex to use with eight different systems needing to be accessed to deal with callers' enquiries.

SIFT's main recommendations are:

- Effectively publicise who is the landlord and the role of the managing agent
- Conduct an investigation into the feasibility and cost of offering a free phone service for customers to use on both YHN's Enquiry Centre and NCC's Call Centre
- Increase staffing levels at the Enquiry Centre across busy times
- Provide a counselling service for staff who have handled traumatic calls
- Housing staff should update logs more frequently, leave contact details on answer phone messages and let the Centre staff know when all members of their section or department will be unavailable to take transferred calls
- A named contractor should be provided for tenants when work is being carried out in their area
- A review of the eight IT systems should be conducted.

## **1. Background**

This report was produced by the newly-established Tenant-led Scrutiny Pool supported by an Independent Tenant Advisor Service, Engage Associates. Engage Associates' role is to help deliver effective, practical support to tenants and leaseholders who want to become involved in scrutinising the performance of Council housing services in Newcastle.

Members of the Pool worked with the Council and YHN to set up scrutiny processes and governance structures. Engage Associates recruited and trained tenants and leaseholders to manage a programme of scrutiny and will support them through their first two years. NCC aims to give tenants the power to be self-sufficient in order to influence, scrutinise and challenge decisions, improving business performance and the quality and standards of housing services and policies.

A diverse group of eight tenants and leaseholders have now been recruited: the intention is to recruit a 'pool' of at least 21 people so that Task and Finish groups can be established from the pool to participate in three scrutiny exercises within each financial year.

## **2. Introduction**

The Scrutiny Pool adopted a name and branding to enable the wider body of tenants and associated partners to quickly identify any information flowing from it. They decided upon the name SIFT – Scrutiny, Involvement For Tenants – which accurately describes what they do, that is, sifting through information to look for evidence from which to analyse service provision and recommend change. The branding was developed by a member of SIFT, Joseph Eldridge.

The intention over time is to take recommendations for scrutiny from a wide range of partners including, tenants, staff, councillors and other interested bodies. For the first scrutiny exercise however SIFT members had to decide amongst themselves which topic to scrutinise. So many aspects of YHN's service provision and the Council's operation are undergoing review that it proved difficult to select an appropriate service to scrutinise. Eventually the following topic was selected:

‘What evidence is there to say that YHN is a ‘can do’ company in terms of meaningfully responding to communication from tenants?’

### **Scope**

To investigate how responsive the Enquiry Centre staff are to requests for service.

### **Timescale**

April 2017 – end of July 2017.

The purpose of this scrutiny exercise is to:

- Determine the differing roles of NCC and YHN in call handling
- Explore how the service is provided
- Identify how effective and responsive YHN staff are to tenants' enquiries
- Recommend, where appropriate, changes or improvements to service provision.

This report details the findings and recommendations of this scrutiny exercise, which took place during April, May, June and July 2017. Future scrutiny exercises will run over three months; this first scrutiny has taken longer because members were new to the experience and had to develop an understanding of the tools which were to be used.

### **3. Methodology and Scope**

There are a variety of tools which can be used to scrutinise services, performance and governance (see Appendix A). The tools selected on this first scrutiny included:

- Briefing by service managers (Jackie Lawrence from YHN and Luke Burton from NCC)
- Desk top review of performance information
- Assessment of relevant complaints
- Mystery Shopping exercise of both Centres
- Work shadowing of staff in the YHN Enquiry Centre
- Staff Focus group for YHN Enquiry Centre Operatives
- Tenant Survey (9,000 on-line tenant users).

To enable SIFT to fully understand and compare and contrast what YHN's Enquiry Centre handled and what NCC's Call Centre dealt with, it was felt that a briefing about activities from both heads of service was needed. To enable a comparison to be made members of SIFT also held the view that some exploration of how the Council's Call Centre handled calls was needed.

SIFT members discussed and agreed the key lines of enquiry which would help them to assess and analyse the evidence flowing from the scrutiny exercise. These included:

- The Home and Communities Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard (this is the standard which covers access to services)
- What are the differing roles of the two call/enquiry centres?
- What performance information is gathered and how is it used?
- How many complaints are received about the YHN Enquiry Centre, and for what activity?
- What do staff think could be improved with the service?
- What do tenants think about the service?

### 3.1 The Briefing

#### The Your Homes Newcastle Enquiry Centre

Jackie Lawrence YHN's Business and Operations Support Co-ordinator provided an overview of the Enquiry Centre's role and activities.

The YHN Enquiry Centre has been operating for five years and is based at YHN House on Benton Park Road. Staff deal with calls on an extensive range of subjects, operating for 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, over two shifts of staff.

The Enquiry Centre handles incoming calls from tenants and other customers, for example the citizens of Newcastle who may call for general information.

The table below shows the type of calls handled during office hours (8:30am – 4:30pm Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday, 8:30 – 3.00 Wednesday) and calls handled out of hours (Monday – Thursday 6pm - 8am and Friday 4.30pm until Monday 8am).

Office Hours Calls Handled	Out of Hours Calls Handled
Concierge	All activities in the left hand column, plus those listed below
ARCH (hate crime)	Envirocall
Ostara Alarm Service	Repairs
Housing YHN Single Number Tenancy Fraud Your Choice Homes	Emergency Duty Team
CCTV in multi-storey flats – footage kept for 30 days (these are not calls, but activities)	Tynetec
Intercoms: Flats Communal areas Front doors Vehicle Barriers Lifts	Out of hours Social Care enquiries
	Outgoing calls, eg out of hours gas servicing appointments

The Centre receives approximately 930 telephone calls per day, with approximately 480 alarm calls per day. There are normally six to eight staff on duty during daytime hours, and two to three staff on duty out of hours. There are two Team Leaders. The busiest time for the Centre is 10:00am – 12 noon, Monday to Thursday and 12 noon until 4:00pm on Friday. Staff use eight different systems to access tenant information.

### **Newcastle City Council Call Centre**

Luke Burton provided an overview of NCC's Call Centre, key points and areas of responsibility.

The Centre is located within Newcastle Civic Centre at Barras Bridge. The switchboard is operational 8:00am – 6:00pm Monday to Thursday and 8:00am – 4.30pm Friday, after which time YHN's call centre takes the calls.

The main areas of activity for NCC's Centre are:

- Corporate complaints
- Electoral register/postal vote enquiries
- Electronic payments
- Envirocall
- Job shop
- Repairs service
- Libraries and Registrars enquiries
- Revenues/benefits/Council Tax enquiries.

The Centre receives approximately 2,000 calls per day, with peaks of activity varying with events occurring in the City.

The Centre is staffed according to demand by three teams with three team managers. Some enquiries can also be made online and this can sometimes result in a quicker response for callers.

A discussion by Pool members followed the presentations from YHN and NCC to clarify the pool's understanding of YHN and NCC roles, how they differ and how this works and who does what. SIFT members felt that the briefing raised the following points.

Key points:

- There is confusion over who is the landlord, which of course is NCC (this is supported by evidence from the Mystery Shopping exercise – see page 13)
- There are delays in responding to calls and having to report incidents several times before a response is received (this is supported from information gathered during the staff Focus Group – see page 17)
- There is a lack of clarity over repairs' job numbers – sometimes they are issued and sometimes not (This is supported by the Mystery Shopping exercise – see page 13).

### **3.2 Desk Top Review of YHN Enquiry Centre Performance Information**

SIFT members reviewed the annual Performance Report for the Financial Year 1<sup>st</sup> April 2016 until 31<sup>st</sup> March 2017. The performance target for phone and intercom calls handled was 80% of calls handled within 20 seconds; however the actual performance achieved was 61.91%. It would be interesting to know the breakdown of performance between the office hours calls handled and the out of hours calls handled: SIFT was advised that this information is available but not easily obtained.

In terms of analysing this information we need to factor in that the Intercom System automatically cuts out after two minutes of requesting service and that there is 20 minutes allowed to complete the call before it cuts out. These two factors make it very difficult to get an accurate picture of true performance.

The Care Alarm calls target performance was 98.5% calls answered within 60 seconds; here the actual performance was 99.55%, out-performing the target.

SIFT members then reviewed the six-monthly Performance Report covering the period 1<sup>st</sup> October 2016 until 30<sup>th</sup> March 2017. During that time the Enquiry Centre received 190,958 calls, of which nearly a quarter (24.61%) were abandoned by the caller. A total of 33,583 were abandoned after the threshold, the maximum delay before abandonment was 36:43 minutes and the average 1:15 minutes.

In the table at Appendix B the abandonment rate for each aspect of the service during the six-month period is listed.

In most service areas there are peaks of activity from 1<sup>st</sup> November until 31<sup>st</sup> January. If we take Envirocall as an example the call abandonment rate over these three months totals 38.5% and is higher in each of the months than the remaining three months which form the Performance Report. SIFT members felt that the reasons for this may be several, including:

- The darker months of the year may cause older people to be more anxious and hence they may make more calls
- The approach of Bonfire Night and the event itself can sometimes be seen as causing anti-social behaviour
- Lower staffing levels as a consequence of staff taking holidays in the run up to the Festive Season and during the Festive period itself when YHN housing offices are closed.

### 3.3 Assessment of YHN's Enquiry Centre Relevant Complaints

In 2016-17 there were 26 complaints received from members of the public linked to the Enquiry Centre. In total there were 410 complaints logged centrally by YHN, meaning that the Enquiry Centre complaints accounted for 6.3 percent of all complaints, however we do not know if these complaints were made by tenants or citizens generally.

Just over a third (10) were justified, and half (13) were found not to be justified. A third of complaints were about a member of staff (9) but only two were found to be justified.

Fifty-three percent of complaints related to 'poor quality of service'.

In 2015/16, 21 complaints about the Enquiry Centre were received. So the trend in complaints has risen this year by approximately 23 percent. It would be interesting to see the figures for 2014/15 but these are difficult to access.

#### Some members of SIFT



### 3.4 Mystery Shopping Exercise

The first attempt by SIFT members to conduct a mystery shopping exercise on YHN's Enquiry Centre failed, as there was a fault on all telephone numbers starting with 278 on that day. This flagged up the need to have a pre-recorded 'apology message' playing when this happens, as many people may make several attempts to make contact, which may waste 'pay as you go telephone' minutes putting a financial strain on some tenants.

Several days later a Mystery Shop on both YHN's and NCC's Centre were made to enable a comparison to be made in terms of responsiveness.

The topics shopped are listed below.

#### **YHN Enquiry Centre**

Help with the new rent portal  
Help with understanding Universal Credit  
What Ostara is used for  
Information about moving Home  
Out of hours repairs  
Concern about a fire door blocked\*  
Smoke Alarm fault

#### **NCC Call Centre**

Blue badge car parking  
Repair reporting  
Social work report  
Envirocall to remove a wheelie bin  
Job Shop query  
Library opening hours  
Council tax query

All of the calls were genuine, that is, the mystery shopper genuinely needed the information requested or had to report an incident, see figure 1, below.

**Fig 1**

*\*Here we see the a photograph of the blocked fire door*



The performance and responsiveness of staff from YHN's Enquiry Centre was varied, on the whole, however calls were answered within the timeframe (20 seconds) and operatives gave the appropriate greeting. The majority of calls were rated as 'good', with staff being helpful and giving useful information.

Two calls, however were not rated as good, but rated as poor. The first was a call about the new rent portal. From first dialling the number to the end of the call only 43 seconds elapsed. The operative gave their appropriate greeting but then, rather than give any of the information simply said, 'Ring tomorrow morning and speak to your housing officer.'

The second poor call was about asking for advice on Universal Credit and the advice given by the operative was 'Call back at 8:30 tomorrow morning to the area office.' The SIFT member felt that her credit on her telephone had been wasted with this call.

YHN handle a large variety of types of call, covering an extensive range of topics. Its staffing levels are not comparable to NCC's Call Centre, with lower numbers of people employed. This may result in longer waiting times for callers to be put through.

As a result of the Mystery Shop the responsiveness of staff from NCC's Call Centre was also deemed to be 'good'. Members of SIFT, however held the view that repairs' job numbers were not given by operatives when a repair was reported; they felt that this was important to tenants so that they could refer to the number when re-contacting the Centre. The Mystery Shopper who reported a repair was not given a repair number by the operative – validating somewhat SIFT members view. The Mystery Shopper who reported the blocked fire door was also told by the operative that YHN was their landlord and it was their job to remove the rubbish, which is somewhat confusing.

One call to contact Envirocall was abandoned after 15 minutes because the Mystery Shopper was concerned too many of her 'pay as you go' minutes were being lost.

### **3.5 Work Shadowing of YHN Enquiry Centre Staff**

Two separate shadowing exercises took place: what follows are the reports of both SIFT members who conducted the shadowing exercise.

#### **First Exercise – YHN Call Centre – At 14:30 on Monday 19<sup>th</sup> June 2017**

**This is the edited, condensed report of Joseph Eldridge, a SIFT Member**  
(Please see the full report at Appendix C.)

I attended YHN House, Newcastle and was taken to the YHN Enquiry Centre, a room about 30ft by 50ft. It was bright with windows at the back.

There were seven/eight workstation turrets with either two or three monitors. There were seven staff, including the shift co-ordinator. There was a large monitor on the wall which displayed the number of calls in the queue and their waiting times. There was also a CCTV monitoring workstation that kept an eye on various blocks and estates.

I was paired with a front line call handler. On her desk were three monitors and two phones. The call handler was pleasant. She told me she would explain the procedures to me when she had the time. I soon learned that she would not actually have any time as there was a constant stream of incoming calls that had to be answered. I was given a headset and began to listen to the incoming calls.

The first call I heard was from a lady whose friend had told her about the rent deposit scheme and she wished to know more. (The rent deposit scheme is where people who wish to rent private landlord property in Newcastle are given assistance in affording a deposit.) The call handler briefly advised the caller, explaining that NCC handled those enquiries and transferred the call.

LAGAN was used to log the call. This appeared on the left hand screen

Another caller wished to make a complaint with regard to a rat problem that she had endured for months.

Another call came from a concerned neighbour who had witnessed an altercation between her neighbour and another man outside her flat. Although the incident had abated and the two individuals involved had returned indoors, she was concerned that it might flare up again. The call handler advised the caller that she would let the concierge know, and if the problem occurred again to call the police.

I also saw JONTEK (Jontek is the alarms system that is used for Telecare, i.e. triggers from pendants being pressed, fall detectors coming off. etc) in use when the call handler answered a call from a woman who had fallen over and could not get back up. The call handler established the caller's identity. The caller was a

customer of Ostara, the community care system. The call handler advised the caller not to struggle and alerted a warden. About ten minutes later, the warden reported he had duly arrived at the address and helped the caller back to her feet. This was all logged in Jontek.

A social worker called from the RVI needing information on housing for a client who was in hospital. The call handler advised her to get in touch with Newcastle Housing Advice Centre as they were the most appropriate people to answer the caller's specific questions.

I noticed that the CCTV system is constantly being watched especially in known trouble spots. It appears that the common problem is people being locked out of their accommodation.

My impression of the enquiry centre was that the staff are dedicated, polite and professional. They genuinely try to help every customer, but of course they are not able to resolve every issue. A lot YHN customers assume that YHN are their landlords. There is confusion as to what the YHN remit is in many tenants' minds. Because of the confusion with their role, customers ring the enquiry centre for issues like repairs, gardens and Envirocall when in fact Newcastle City Council has its own Call Centre. This problem is further exacerbated by the fact that YHN enquiry centre handles out of hours and weekend calls for both YHN and Newcastle City Council.

I believe the enquiry centre should have a higher profile where their remit is clearly advertised and that the services provided by Newcastle City Council should also be more clearly differentiated.

I enjoyed the shadowing and realise that the small team of staff are constantly in demand.

**Second Exercise – YHN Call Centre – 26<sup>th</sup> June 2017, 16:00-18:00**  
**First impressions – this is a report prepared by Andrew Perks, a SIFT member**

The interface on the 3 screens each call handler had at their work station was confusing for *me* but the staff seemed to have mastered it. The flow from taking the call to the next step seemed unnecessarily complex though the staff knew the way through the systems. Call handlers manage calls from YHN services like care homes as well as individual tenants. Calls were answered politely, by name and department. A large screen at the end of the room showed the number of calls waiting, but staff did not refer to it.

## **Problems**

Staff dealt with angry, confused callers with respect and skill. Some callers did not know what they wanted; perhaps ringing for a chat or disgruntled about some slightly housing-related issue. They were dealt with sympathetically.

Call centre staff experience the same frustration as tenants when they have to call the repair centre; they can be on hold for many minutes. There is not a fast track from YHN to NCC repairs. (Staff from the two call centres do not know each other.)

## **Morale**

The team appeared to be well motivated and happy to be there; there was good social interaction between team members who both sought advice from each other and volunteered solutions to queries the call handler couldn't answer. They were able to unwind between calls when the phones were not ringing. Staff have a small kitchen in which they can take breaks – there are not many local facilities they can use.

## **Flexibility**

Staff were happy to work the flexible hours needed though some would prefer early shifts and some wouldn't mind working nights.

**Overall**, I was impressed by the ability of the workers to respond to a huge variety of calls; if they could give answers they would, but they also knew who to pass issues onto for them to be resolved the next day. Staff were aware when particular departments (housing offices, Envirocall, etc.) were closing for the day. Emails or messages through more targeted internal systems were used in a timely fashion.

I can't think of a way the service could be improved though the systems require a lot of training (which is given) for staff to become familiar with them.

### **3.6 Staff Focus Group**

A focus group to elicit the views of YHN Enquiry Centre staff about their work, working environment and suitability of the technical equipment they use was held on 20<sup>th</sup> June 2017. Three Customer Service operatives with one Co-ordinator participated in the session.

The topics for discussion were split into technical and non-technical issues. Four areas of assessment were established for each issue:

- What works well?
- It would be even better if ...
- In an ideal world (expressed as Wow), and
- Priorities to focus on.

Please see Appendix D for a complete version of the feedback.

During the discussions on these areas it became apparent that the range and scope of the operatives work was extensive – with staff quite often having to deal with extremely sensitive and emotive topics. They described watching CCTV live footage when a tenant threw themselves off a high rise building and died, watched a pensioner who had pressed their emergency pendant lie on the floor for four hours on Christmas Day, accompanied by a friend whilst waiting for an ambulance to arrive (he was not considered to be an emergency) and had to talk to people who were very afraid for the welfare of children.

They described having to take calls from irate and abusive customers and then immediately afterwards having to talk to vulnerable people seeking help. They also talked about people calling the Centre when they had found relatives or neighbours unconscious or obviously very ill, rather than call the emergency services – precious minutes are wasted by not dialling 999. This is an area where knowledge about what to do in an emergency should be publicised by both YHN and the Council.

Staff explained that they counselled each other after dealing with traumatic calls or watching upsetting CCTV. SIFT members felt that the staff should have access to professional support or counselling after experiencing extreme calls or watching upsetting CCTV footage.

The operatives told the Scrutiny Pool members that they built their knowledge base on how to answer the varied range of enquiries through experience and through working co-operatively with other staff members. They described how they had taught themselves to listen to one phone conversation in one ear and their perhaps less experience colleagues conversation with another customer in the other, so that they could correct any incorrect information or incorrect advice.

SIFT members asked about the IT equipment staff use to retrieve and record callers' information: staff responded that they had to use eight different IT systems, which made handling information complex. They stated that they thought it would be useful to review the IT systems to assess if a more efficient system could be used.

During the discussion the operatives described the reaction of staff from other departments or sections who had visited the Centre: without exception they felt that those members of staff were surprised at the range of topics they had to address. It was suggested that it would be helpful if at the point new staff were engaged that their induction included a visit to the Centre during its busiest period on a Monday morning.

A key frustration for staff is the number of 'call backs' they had because housing staff did not leave their name, extension number and what they wanted to talk to the tenant about. When the tenant called again, and got through to the Enquiry Centre they assumed that they were talking to the person who had left them a message.

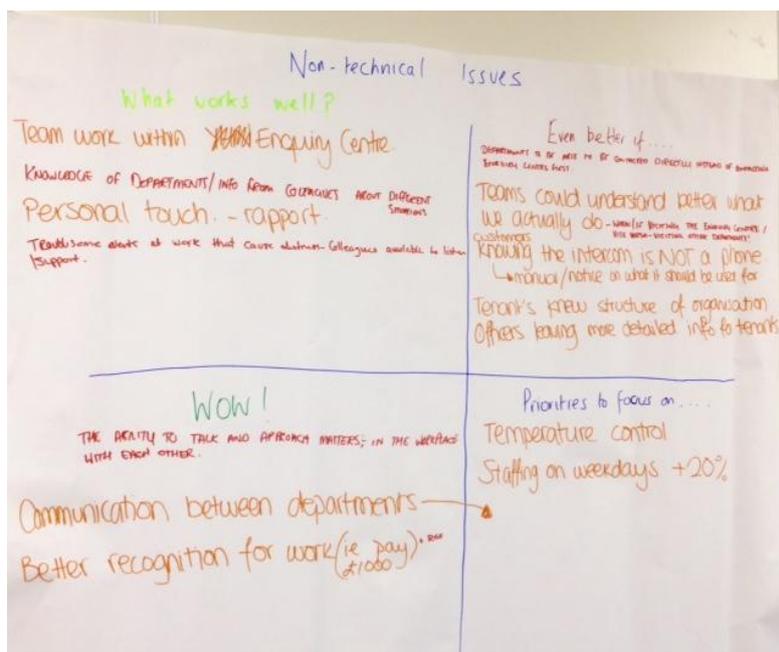
Additionally, when a tenant had requested a 'call back' from a general member of staff they were not always actioned, and it has been known for a tenant to request the call back between five and ten times. The IT system can record details to say when the call back was made and what action was taken. The Enquiry Centre staff felt that if the recording system was used more frequently then it would help them resolve issues with tenants because they could look at the system and see if any action was outstanding. Another issue with the systems is that they are not updated frequently enough.

Some sections within the general housing staff informed the Enquiry Centre when they were not going to be available for calls to be transferred, for example when a small section was having a meeting. The Caretaking staff did inform the Centre routinely when they were not going to be available. SIFT would recommend that all other sections and departments also did this.

Another frustration for staff was not being able to give the name of a key contact to tenants when contractors were carrying out work in an area. SIFT members felt that housing staff should supply key contact names to the Enquiry Centre when work is being carried out in their area.

Staff explained that a 'pool' of 12 new staff are currently being trained, however the pool staff will only be working when there is a shortfall in permanent staff. As already described permanent staff acquire their knowledge through experience, and there was a concern that if there were large gaps in time between the pool staff working in the Enquiry Centre they may not retain all of the information necessary to make them effective.

The Focus Group discussions helped the Scrutiny Pool members to understand the day-to-day role of the Customer Service operatives and how valuable a role they play in helping the residents of Newcastle gain access to essential services. It helped members interpret the performance statistics in a more realistic manner and recognise the difficulties encountered in delivering a wide-ranging and often sensitive service.



### 3.7 Tenant Survey

Overall 283 people responded to the survey, however many respondents did not answer all of the questions; therefore much of the analysis can only be based on the numbers who actually answered a particular question. Of the 278 who completed the first part of the survey 204 people called during office hours, 13 out of hours, 44 didn't know and 17 never made contact with the centre. Of those that did make contact 195 were by telephone, 21 by intercom and 62 were not sure which method they used.

Of the 211 people who responded to how helpful they found the service 76 (36%) said helpful, 94 (44%) said very helpful, 25 (12%) said unhelpful and 17 (8%) said very unhelpful. Eighty percent of respondents thought the service to be either helpful or very helpful and 20% thought the service to be either unhelpful or very unhelpful.

The main reasons for contact and their level of satisfaction with the contact are as follows:

Reason for Contact	Overall Numbers	Helpful or Very Helpful	Unhelpful or Very unhelpful
Rent Query/Balance	52	43	8
Repairs	45	27	16
Anti-Social Behaviour (including noise complaint)	24	10	11
Make a Payment	20	17	2

Reason for Contact	Overall Numbers	Helpful or Very Helpful	Unhelpful or Very unhelpful
Query about a bin	20	16	3
Help to find a home	17	10	7
Garden Maintenance	11	7	4
Concierge	6	6	0

The highest number of people who found their service to be unhelpful were those enquiring about repairs. However the highest proportions (expressed as a percentage) of people finding their service unhelpful were those who contacted about garden maintenance (57%), anti-social behaviour (46%), finding a home (41%) and repairs (35%). Whilst some of these figures were based on relatively few respondents the significant areas of dissatisfaction would appear to be those involving repairs and anti-social behaviour. There was no discernible difference of view between those who contacted the centre during or outside of office hours or those who contacted the service by telephone or intercom.

Of the 112 people who left comments in response to the question 'what improvements would you like to see made to our Enquiry Centre?' 27 people (approximately 24%) left positive comments about the service they received or the staff that were involved; unsurprisingly these respondents had also described the service as helpful or very helpful.

Of the 42 respondents who had described their experience with the service as unhelpful or very unhelpful, 34 of them left comments, although some were general comments and others related to specific issues, 3 broad categories of concern start to be identified:

- a) Staff related (10 comments)
- b) Call back related (7 comments)
- c) System related (5 comments)

Of the 170 people who described the service they received as helpful or very helpful, 77 people left comments in the section asking about what improvements they would like to see. Again whilst the majority of these comments were general in nature or related to specific issues, 30 of them related to the identified categories as above, these are:

- a) Staff related (4 comments)
- b) Call back related (4 comments)
- c) System related (22 comments)

If we look at both respondents that found their contact with the Centre helpful and those that found it unhelpful, together with those who left comments for improving the YHN Centre, we can see that the largest area for improvement would appear to be those relating to the system itself which largely includes the amount of time people are required to wait for a response to their enquiry, this is regardless of whether they found their response to be helpful or not. A second area of improvement appears to be with the service people received from staff; however this could be as the majority of comments were from people who did not find the service helpful

When reading the comments and seeing why customers have made contact it appears that there is confusion over who does what and who is who between NCC and YHN. A lot of the enquiries that have come in are not dealt with by the YHN Enquiry Centre but more the Councils' Contact Centre so there seems some uncertainty about how accurately customers have responded. In terms of the wider review of the Call Centres it may indicate that customers are not too bothered about who they speak to, or who does what, they just want a good service.

#### **4. Findings**

On the whole SIFT members felt YHN's Enquiry Centre staff provided a good service in sometimes difficult circumstances, however the systems they use are complex and are not always updated on a regular basis.

The briefings given by Jackie Lawrence and Luke Burton really helped to clarify the differences in service provision between the two Centres, and SIFT members were surprised at the range of information both Centre staff needed to know and retain.

The Desk top analysis of the YHN Enquiry Centre performance data was useful but did not actually paint an accurate picture of 'real performance', as the number of abandoned calls also included calls using the intercom system, which cuts out after two minutes after making the call. SIFT members felt that a 'greetings page' should be shown to intercom users before they logged in detailing that the call would cut out after two minutes.

The performance data also does not differentiate between calls made during the day, evening or weekends – all of which have different staffing levels.

The longest period of time elapsed before a call was abandoned was 36:43 minutes. SIFT members felt that someone using a 'pay as you go' phone would have used most of their credit if they had held on for a response for this long. They felt that a free phone service should be offered for both the YHN and the NCC Centres.

The performance data showed that there is a peak in requests for service from 1<sup>st</sup> November until 31<sup>st</sup> January and the abandonment rate increased during this period. SIFT members felt that the abandonment rate could be reduced in these three months if staff levels were increased.

The assessment of relevant complaints showed that only 26 formal complaints had been received in 2016/17, of which 10 were found to be justified. Looking at YHN's website it seems fairly easy to complain, however the matter has to be reported at the local housing office before it is considered in order for local resolution to be tried first.

The Mystery Shopping exercise of the YHN Centre raised questions about responsiveness of staff, in two calls to YHN the operative should have been able to give the requested information but just asked the caller to phone their local office in the morning.

The two members of SIFT that carried out the work shadowing gave positive reports of service provision.

The staff Focus Group raised a number of interesting points: the key frustrations for staff were largely caused by housing staff not logging updates on call back requests or giving their name, telephone number and reason for calling when they left messages on tenants' answer machines. Enquiry Centre staff also felt that housing staff did not fully understand the way in which they worked and the issues caused when logs were not kept up to date. SIFT members felt that housing staff and contractors should be instructed to update logs and leave their contact details on answer machines when leaving tenants a message. They also felt that as part of new staff induction a visit to the Enquiry Centre at one of its busiest times should be included. In addition both staff and SIFT members felt that staffing levels should be increased across busy periods of time.

The Work Shadowing exercise and the staff Focus Group session highlighted the complexity of the IT systems the Enquiry Centre staff have to work with. In total eight different IT systems are used to retrieve and record callers' information. Both staff and SIFT members felt that the IT systems should be the subject of a review.

The tenant survey had 278 responses with 80% of respondents stating that they thought the service to be either helpful or very helpful. The highest number of people who found their service to be unhelpful were those enquiring about repairs.

## Recommendations – Action Plan

Recommendation	Management Response	Proposed Actions	Timescale	Responsibility
Further publicity about who is the landlord and who is the managing agent should be made available for tenants and for both YHN's Enquiry Centre staff and NCC's Call Centre staff				
To investigate the feasibility and cost of offering a free phone service for customers to use on both YHN's Enquiry Centre and NCC's Call Centre				
A 'Greetings Page' should be inserted on the intercom system's electron display stating the purpose and function of the system				
Clear information about what tenants in sheltered schemes should do in an emergency situation (dial 999, not call the Enquiry Centre) should be made available				
Increase staffing levels across busy times and rota pool staff frequently so they build knowledge				

Recommendation	Management Response	Proposed Actions	Timescale	Responsibility
A counselling service should be available for Enquiry Centre staff who have dealt with traumatic material or viewed distressing CCTV				
Housing staff should update logs				
Housing staff should leave their contact details on answer phone messages to tenants				
Housing staff should let the Enquiry Centre know when their section or department will be unavailable				
A contact for a named contractor should be provided for the Enquiry Centre staff to give to tenants to answer their queries about work in an area				

In addition to the above recommendations for the YHN Enquiry Centre, NCC's Call Centre operatives should be instructed to always issue repair numbers to tenants who report repairs.

## Scrutiny Tools in Action

Tool	Description	Purpose
Desk top review	Exploring the existing policies, procedures, service standards and other documents which relate to the Scrutiny question	To gain an understanding of the scrutiny activity and how it is supposed to operate according to policy and procedure
Surveys	Designing a form which asks the same questions of a number of different people – the questions are designed to address areas of the Scrutiny activity	To gather quantitative information in order to assess views or, for example satisfaction levels with the Scrutiny activity
Focus Group	Small group of invited participants asked to share thoughts, feelings, attitudes and ideas on a specific question. The focus group meets only once and is made up of specific types of people, for example young people, older people, people with disabilities, etc	To question a group of people from a specific category about an aspect of service or governance to see if there is a consensus view from that group on issues relating to the Scrutiny question

Tool	Description	Purpose
Interviews of Staff, Tenants, Board members, etc	One to one meetings to gather in depth or sensitive qualitative information	To be able to hear the views of an individual, often used after surveys or focus groups to drill down to a deeper understanding of issues
Shadowing Staff	Unobtrusively following staff as they go about their day to day job	To get a feel for the typical activities and role a specific operative may deliver. The staff member or contractor should not alter their normal routine during or as a consequence of the shadowing
Mystery Shopping	Testing out services to monitor and improve them	To give the shopper a 'real' experience of what service delivery is like
Visits to other organisations	Organising a tour of another, similar organisation's operation and hearing how they deliver a specific aspect of service which relates to the Scrutiny question	Comparing and contrasting one service against another of a similar type

Tool	Description	Purpose
Inspection	Following a line of enquiry	Used to see if the service meets the published service standard
Bench Marking	Taking an area of performance and comparing the organisation's performance in that area against a range of other organisations	To assess whether or not the organisation is doing the best that it possibly can in delivering an aspect of service

## Call Abandonment Rate

Service Area	Number of Calls	Calls Abandoned (percentage)	Maximum Delay (minutes)	Average Delay (minutes)
Concierge	1,509	23.13	15.57	1.37
YHN Hate Incidents	116	41.38	12.15	1.35
YHN Ostara	4,204	9.13	14.51	1.49
YHN CCAS	10,962	25.51	32.52	2.04
YHN Communal Flats	52,362	32.95	04.57	00.29
YHN Communal Front Doors	33,160	34.67	04.14	00.27
YHN Communal lifts	7,407	23.65	04.58	00.41
YHN Envirocall Out of Hours	5,240	9.87	31.37	03.56
YHN Housing Out of Hours	18,684	18.97	32.41	02.30
YHN Repairs Out of Hours	13,842	6.85	34.42	05.52

<b>Service Area</b>	<b>Number of Calls</b>	<b>Calls Abandoned (percentage)</b>	<b>Maximum Delay (minutes)</b>	<b>Average Delay (minutes)</b>
YHN Single Number	30,593	20.78	35.43	02.37
YHN Social Care	6,491	3.62	17.35	01.43
YHN Tenancy Fraud	25	48	04.51	00.52
YHN Your Choice Homes	6,382	20.93	34.42	02.53

### **This is a report prepared by Joseph Eldridge**

At 14:30 on Monday 19<sup>th</sup> June 2017 I attended YHN House, Newcastle and was taken to the YHN Enquiry Centre, a room about 30ft by 50ft. It was bright with windows at the back.

There were seven/eight workstation turrets with either two or three monitors. There were seven staff including the shift co-ordinator. There was a large monitor on the wall which displayed the number of calls in the queue and their waiting times. There was also a CCTV monitoring workstation that kept an eye on various blocks and estates.

I was paired with a front line call handler. On her desk were three monitors and two phones. The call handler was pleasant. She told me she would explain the procedures to me when she had the time. I soon learned that she would not actually have any time as there was a constant stream of incoming calls that had to be answered. I was given a headset and began to listen to the incoming calls.

The first call I heard was from a lady whose friend had told her about the rent deposit scheme and she wished to know more. (The rent deposit scheme is where people who wish to rent property in Newcastle privately are given assistance in affording a deposit.) The call handler briefly advised the caller, explaining that NCC handled those enquiries and transferred the call, saying 'Contact the team on 0191 277 1438 or email [privaterentedservice@newcastle.gov.uk](mailto:privaterentedservice@newcastle.gov.uk)

The call lasted less than 2 minutes. The call handler had introduced herself politely and asked how she may help. She ended the call asking if she could help with anything else. The caller was happy with the advice given.

LAGAN was used to log the call. This appeared on the left hand screen.

Another call that the call handler dealt with concerned an enquiry from a non NCC tenant. Although the caller was renting privately, he had registered with YHN/Tyne & Wear Homes and so was eligible to bid on properties. He had bid on properties but was confused as to how bidding worked; he also wanted to change his band so as to increase his chances of getting the property he wanted. The call handler explained the bidding process to the caller. She also told the caller the various criteria needed to change the band including sending in relevant documents. She advised him that Newcastle Housing Advice Centre would be the best to help him if he had any other enquiries.

Another caller wished to make a complaint with regard to a rat problem that she had endured for months. She lives in a terraced house and the rats are terrifying her two young children. She has called Envirocall on several occasions who have

responded by putting down rat poison. The caller claimed that the rats were just ignoring the poison and scurrying around. She also feared that her children may eat the poison whilst she was not looking. The caller claimed that she had recently made an appointment with NCC pest control, but nobody turned up. She suggested that she was going to complain to the local newspapers. The call handler advised that the rat matter would have to be dealt with by Envirocall. She also said she would raise the issue as a complaint and that it could take up to ten working days for someone to reply. This call was answered well and the call handler displayed empathy with the caller.

Another call came from a concerned neighbour who had witnessed an altercation between her neighbour and another man outside her flat. Although the incident had abated and the two individuals involved had returned indoors, she was concerned that it might flare up again. The call handler advised the caller that she would let the concierge know, and if the problem occurred again to call the police.

I also saw JONTEK (Jontek is the alarms system that is used for Telecare, i.e. triggers from pendants being pressed, fall detectors coming off, etc) in use when the call handler answered a call from a woman who had fallen over and could not get back up. The call handler established the caller's identity. The caller was a customer of Ostara, the community care system. The call handler advised the caller not to struggle and alerted a warden. About ten minutes later, the warden reported he had duly arrived at the address and helped the caller back to her feet. This was all logged in Jontek.

Another caller wanted an Emergency Alarm Key system restored at an address for a friend who, having had it removed, changed his mind. The call handler called up the relevant details, advised the caller of the costs involved and made an appointment for the premises.

A social worker called from the RVI needing information on housing for a client who was in hospital. The call handler advised her to get in touch with Newcastle Housing Advice Centre as they were the most appropriate people to answer the caller's specific questions.

The call handler checked on a woman whose Ostara pendant had alerted her that there was a fall. The registered woman failed to answer the phone so the call handler called the warden who attended and found the customer well, but unaware that she had alerted the contact centre.

I noticed that the CCTV system is constantly being watched especially in known trouble spots. It appears that the common problem is people being locked out of their accommodation.

Another call concerned a rent card not working so that a tenant of NCC could not pay the rent due. The caller was advised that he could still pay the rent via the post office with the reference number or barcode and that a replacement card could be ordered. Not sure if the rent card will be replaced by the council or YHN.

The call handler also explained that the enquiry centre had a customer call back service if the enquiry cannot be answered immediately.

My impression of the enquiry centre was that the staff are dedicated, polite and professional. They genuinely try to help every customer, but of course they are not able to resolve every issue. A lot YHN customers assume that YHN are their landlords. There is confusion as to what the YHN remit is. They are the ALMO (Arms Length Management Organisation) for Newcastle City Council and manage the services on behalf of the council. Because of the confusion with their role, customers ring the enquiry centre for issues like repairs, gardens, Envirocall when in fact Newcastle City Council has its own Call Centre. This problem is further exacerbated by the fact that YHN enquiry centre handles out of hours and weekend calls for both YHN and Newcastle City Council.

I believe the enquiry centre should have a higher profile, where their remit is clearly advertised and that the services provided by Newcastle City Council should also be more clearly differentiated.

I enjoyed the shadowing and realise that the small team of staff are constantly in demand.

The following is a summary of the comments expressed during the Focus Group Session

Technical Issues	
<p>What works well?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• LAGAN – systems, provides good information about customer accounts</li> <li>• Classifications – enables operatives to work through the system logically and with guidance</li> <li>• Tyne and Wear Homes information (this is the choice based lettings system)</li> <li>• Intranet – finding about changes in policy or practice within YHN</li> <li>• Northgate – being able to look at rent accounts</li> </ul>	<p>Even better if ...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The scripting was updated more regularly (this refers to the information held on LAGAN)</li> <li>• The IT system works better to update information</li> <li>• An ‘out of order’ message was played when the systems are down so that tenants do not wait on line unnecessarily</li> <li>• Making telephone numbers for different departments more accessible on the website and social media</li> <li>• More officers updating Northgate more frequently so we have accurate information</li> <li>• Having the name of people who are responsible for things (this refers to, for example where contracts are let for refurbishment. If the operatives had a named individual they could contact tenants’ issues could be resolved more quickly and more satisfactorily</li> <li>• Call back requests being addressed (operatives said that they ‘felt’ for the tenant when call backs had not been made. Tenants sometimes have to telephone five or 10 times before action is taken</li> <li>• When staff leave telephone messages for tenants they should include their name, extension number and reason why they want to talk to the tenant so that the tenant doesn’t think it is the Enquiry Centre staff who have called them</li> <li>• When the server goes down call backs can be lost in the ether – this needs to be resolved</li> <li>• Alarm monitoring faults got resolved quicker – they can block up calls which may be an emergency</li> </ul>

### Technical Issues (continued)

#### Wow!

- Having a system where we can have updates on tenants' access/queries, etc
- Getting through to correct department first time

#### Priorities to focus on ...

- Providing a good service
- Making sure call back requests are sent to the right department
- Developing an IT system where updates on queries are input by staff who deal with them and give Enquiry Centre staff the latest position on any query
- Having more information about which department deals with which topic and staff from those departments being clear when calling tenants that they are, for example dealing with financial issues or general housing management issue
- Departments communicating as to when they're in the office/not in - Garden Care do this currently.

### Non-Technical Issues

#### What works well?

- Team working within the Enquiry Centre
- Knowledge of departments/information from colleagues about different situations.
- Personal touch – rapport with tenants
- Troublesome events at work that cause distress – colleagues to listen/support, ie having to deal with emotive issues from tenants and other residents operatives then receive support from colleagues on how to deal with their own reactions to these

#### Even better if ...

- Departments to be able to be contacted directly instead of Enquiry Centre first
- Teams could better understand what we do – visiting the Enquiry Centre and Centre staff visiting other departments
- Customers knowing the intercom is not a phone and understand what it should be used for (it was suggested that a notice be placed above the intercom to describe this)
- Tenants knew the structure of the organisation
- Officers giving more detailed information to tenants generally

## Non-Technical Issues (continued)

### Wow!

- The ability to talk and approach matters in the workplace with each other
- Communication between departments is at a better level
- Better recognition for the type of work carried out (average salary for take home pay is £1,000 per month)

### Priorities to focus on ...

- The temperature control in the Centre does not enable staff to work in comfort
- Staffing on weekdays and perhaps Saturdays needs increasing by 20%
- Communication between departments is improved