

How do YHN and NCC attempt to overcome the stigmatisation of tenants?

1. Why we chose to scrutinise this topic

The social housing Green Paper ‘a new deal for social housing’, published in August 2018 discussed, amongst other topics, the stigmatisation of social housing and suggested ways to overcome this. The government built upon the results of the consultation on the paper and published a White Paper in November 2020, entitled ‘The charter for social housing residents.’ Chapter 4 of the charter discusses treating social housing tenants with respect.

SIFT members wanted to assess how YHN and NCC ensured that they worked in ways which would promote respect for tenants and thus reduce the levels of stigmatisation experienced by them.

2. Scope of the Review

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

- To identify if YHN’s and NCC’s literature meets the guidelines of the Fair Press Guide
- To assess the impact language and behaviour of both staff and tenants has on image
- 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:

- A briefing by the service lead
- Reviewing the Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard
- Assessing the Social Housing Green Paper 2018 and the White Paper of 2020
- Assessing the Fair Press Guide
- Conducting a desktop review of relevant literature
- Considering YHN’s tracked media coverage
- Reviewing stories that YHN have managed to keep out of the papers
- Reviewing YHN’s press releases
- Reviewing YHN’s Chit Chat content
- Reviewing ‘See the Person’ Campaign Survey Results
- Conducting a Mystery Shop
- Assessing relevant formal complaints.

4. Equality Impact Assessment

SIFT members considered the nine protected characteristics contained within the Equality Act 2010 to assess if any of them would be negatively impacted by carrying out this scrutiny topic. SIFT does not consider that any internal or external groups would be negatively impacted by the scrutiny.

5. What is stigma and why is it associated with social housing?

‘Stigma is a social process by which a person or group experiences, perceives or anticipates an adverse social judgement that results in discrimination, exclusion, rejection, blame or devaluation as a result of an enduring feature of identity.’ (Ade Kearns, Oliver Kearns and Louise Lawson, 2013.)

The term ‘social housing’ does the sector no favour as in the minds of those persons who have never lived or worked in council or housing association properties the word ‘social’ is associated with Social Security or welfare benefits. This assumption may lead those persons to believe that everyone who lives in social housing is unemployed and living on the state.

The English Housing Survey shows that around 70 percent of social housing tenants are in work or retired, with only seven percent of tenants unemployed. Thirty percent of social housing tenants in receipt of housing benefits are also in work. The remaining 23 percent are unable to work due to caring responsibilities or disability.

The stigmatisation of social housing has happened over a period of time, some of the causes include:

- The outcome of policy: decreased investment in social housing, the Right-to-Buy and aiming for ‘a nation of homeowners’, reduction on welfare expenditure and cuts in public spending (austerity).
- Economic, social and cultural changes: loss of manufacturing and big employers, reduction of well-paid and stable jobs for the working classes and the increase in low pay, precarious and temporary employment, disappearance or fragmentation of traditional local communities, replaced by a more transient and fragmented population, and rise of a culture of individualism.
- Media: negative portrayal in the media and by politicians in the media.
- Quality of the built environment (poor architectural choices and building materials) and problems with the management of estates (lack of maintenance, no dialogue with communities, lack of or excessive policing).

The consequences of stigmatisation of social housing include it being seen as a ‘last resort’ of housing by many. Indeed there is some evidence that people have moved into private rented property to escape the stigmatisation, as others would not know if they owned the property or not.

6. Briefing by Service Lead

SIFT members participated in a briefing session on what YHN does in an attempt to overcome stigmatisation. Lou Grogan, Engagement Officer and Laura O'Donovan, Communications Officer of YHN delivered a joint briefing on methods their organisation employ to overcome stigma.

Lou spoke about the specialist training programme YHN has in place to ensure that all staff understand the diverse needs of customers. The programme is entitled 'First Impressions training course' and was designed by the Institute of Customer Service. The programme, which runs over two days, aims to help staff think about the customer service they provide and learn how to apply best practice to support YHN in developing and maintaining long-lasting customer relationships.

The Learning outcomes of the programme include:

- Appreciating the role of a customer service professional
- Knowing what excellent customer service is and how to deliver it in your role within your organisation
- Developing a service reputation through trust
- Communicating effectively
- Understanding the role of Emotional Intelligence in your role as a customer service professional
- Feeling confident in using appropriate behaviour when dealing with challenging customer interactions
- Recognising the skills, attitudes and behaviours that create a winning team in the delivery of excellent customer service.

As well as attending the training sessions, staff develop a Service Improvement Opportunity of their own which will positively impact on the customer service they, their department or their organisation delivers. One example of a Service Improvement Opportunity was the development of training programme for non-income staff to receive income training.

Together with the training programme YHN has developed a relationship with the local press and media. Laura gave the example of stories about customers they keep out of the press to protect customers and positive stories they try to promote, however she emphasised that the press will only print stories they feel will generate interest and that YHN has no effective control over press behaviour.

She also spoke about the relationship YHN has with the television channels. She said that until recently they had a good relationship with the TV drama Vera, which is set in and around Newcastle; however they had since decided not to cooperate with the programme as the production team wanted to use very negative images of the city.

The discussion then moved on to YHN's Chit Chat page. SIFT members explained that many customers did not understand the purpose of the page, for example, some people tried to report repairs there or make a complaint about the organisation. Members stated that they thought a regular reminder posted on the page about what the site was for would be helpful. Also an explanation about when staff would be able to respond to messages would ensure that customers were not frustrated by a lack of an immediate response. (Please see section 12 of the report for further discussion around Chit Chat.)

7. The 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 the diverse needs of tenants.

All three activities impact on the reputation of social landlords and the relationship they have with tenants. It is therefore important to explore how YHN and NCC comply with this Regulatory Standard.

In terms of Customer service, choice and complaints the Customer Survey carried out by YHN in July/August 2020 showed that 73.8 percent of customers felt supported by YHN. This result demonstrates that 26.2 percent do not feel supported and further work may need to be carried out to improve performance in this area.

In 2021 (from 6th April) YHN received 16 complaints about a member of staff. Staff complaints vary, and include issues with parking or driving to poor communication or being unresponsive. The general attitude of staff was also mentioned. Twelve complaints are closed. Five were upheld (42%), five were not upheld and two were partially upheld.

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. Understanding and responding to the diverse needs of tenants is demonstrated by the range of groups supported by both YHN and NCC.

8. The social housing green paper and the charter for social housing residents

A Green Paper is a preliminary report of Government proposals that is published in order to provoke discussion. It is the first step in shaping new legislation. It contains



ideas and thoughts about what could change, what needs to happen to affect the change and asks for others' thoughts about what the Government is proposing.

The aim of the document was to allow people both inside and outside Parliament to give the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) feedback on its policy and legislative proposals.

In his foreword to the Paper the then Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, James Brokenshire (August 2018), stated that 'social housing can be both a safety net and a springboard to home ownership', which is a disappointing statement to make in a document that attempts to discuss how to address stigma in social housing.

The Paper offered a number of possible solutions to the stigma question: organising street parties being one of them!

The White Paper, entitled 'The charter for social housing residents' built on the consultation feedback from the Green Paper and chapter 4 of the document discusses tenants being treated with respect, backed by strong Consumer Regulation, the Standards being reviewed and updated. A Code of Practice for landlords to comply with the Consumer Standards will also be published.

The White Paper also states that government will remove the 'serious detriment' test (the level of harm to tenants before the Regulator will intervene in the work of a social landlord) and introduce routine inspections.

The Paper also states that provisions in contracts between local authorities and Arms Length Management Organisations or Tenant Management Organisations would be deemed void if they hindered the Regulator of Social Housing in its exercise of its powers.

All of the proposed changes in the White Paper will mean that YHN and NCC will need to put in place steps to conform to the new ways of working and ensure that they adopt best practice in service delivery and meeting the needs and aspirations of tenants.

9. The Fair Press Guide

A campaign which was sponsored by seventeen housing organisations in England and supported by the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) sought to challenge negative perceptions that impact upon social housing tenants. The campaign resulted in a guide for people in the media.

Fair Press for Tenants

<http://seetheperson.wpengine.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Benefit-to-Society-Fair-Press-Guide.pdf> seeks to challenge misrepresentations by describing the impact

of poor reporting and providing an alternative way to approach covering stories about social housing. The guide is aimed at journalists, PR professionals, documentary makers and any media workers keen to

hear the views of their readers, viewers and listeners on media representation of life in social housing.

The Guide is well-meaning, seeking empathy and solidarity. However it does moralise and lacks a pragmatic approach (fails to demonstrate how a community can work with the media as opposed to just telling off the media). It also fails to understand how the media works and creates expectations for an ideal media (as opposed to how the real media operates).

The guide needs to provide sources (possibly weblinks) to more up-to-date statistics about social housing. The best part is the section 'Tips from tenants on how to report fairly' (page 11), establishing trust, a common purpose and understanding is important in personal stories.

A review of the content of Homes and people published by YHN and Citylife, published by NCC demonstrated that both organisations largely conform to the guidelines contained in the Fair Press Guide.

There were one or two occasions when members thought the wording of some of Citylife's headlines and content were not so positive, for example, 'We will wage war on litter.' (Spring and Winter editions 2019.) SIFT think that the term 'waging war' is not a very positive activity and could have the potential to produce negative feelings in some people. SIFT thought that the editor of Citylife should be aware of using negative connotations.

10. See the Person Campaign and Survey

The 'See the Person' Campaign <https://seetheperson.org> aims to tackle the common misrepresentations of social housing tenants in the local and national media which often include inaccurate perceptions, such as tenants being associated with exploiting the benefit system and living in run down estates. These misrepresentations are damaging and drive the public to have a typically negative stereotypical view of social housing tenants.

The Campaign is sponsored by 26 housing organisations across the country and has commissioned an academic research programme into the problem of stereotyping social housing tenants to deliver a high impact campaign that will challenge the way the public think and tackle the stigma associated with social housing tenants.

Part of the research programme involved an online survey running between March and June 2019, in which 699 people who live in social housing took part. Participants were from across the country and were self-selected, using a snowball methodology (where one survey respondent is asked to pass the survey onto other possible

respondents). The survey was set up in response to a request from the MHCLG who wanted more data around the impact of negative stereotypes.

Most respondents said they had experienced negative stereotypes about people living in social housing (74 percent said they had, a further 10 percent were not sure). The main source of this stigma was very direct and local, with comments, assumptions and discriminatory attitudes experienced from neighbours, family, others in the community or institutions. At an extreme, this led to bullying and anti-social behaviour towards tenants or those who have lived in social housing.

The media and politicians were also common sources of stigma, sometimes very specifically, but often as part of an all-pervasive attitude that many respondents experienced. This ties in with earlier findings by the Benefit to Society campaign that 9 out of 10 tenants think the media portrays them negatively.

11. Desktop review of relevant literature

A number of academic essays on stigma in general and stigma relating to social housing were reviewed to assist SIFT members to develop their knowledge of the subject. They included:

- Combating the stigmatisation in social housing neighbourhoods in Dublin, Ireland
- Notorious Places Image Reputation Stigma the role of Newspapers in Area Reputations for Social Housing Estates
- Place-making in an American Housing Project
- Public housing and the politics of stigma
- Telling others how you live
- The invention of the 'sink estate'
- Welfare safety net or Tenure of Choice, The Dilemma Facing Social Housing Policy in England.

The academic research concluded that the stigmatisation of social housing and its tenants is best understood as a symptom of systemic forms of inequality and uneven power relationships. These difficulties also apply to campaigns to tackle the problem.

12. YHN's Chit Chat content



SIFT members reviewed recent entries to YHN's Chit Chat pages. A large number of entries contained negative comments about YHN in general or a specific aspect of service. Some responses from staff were informative and reassuring, however a number also stated that they would pass on the message to the relevant body, but

SIFT members thought that a more positive, empowering response would be for staff to give the appropriate number for the customer to contact directly.

Chit Chat had a link to an article in the Chronicle about the poor housing conditions a YHN customer was experiencing: SIFT members thought this did not promote a positive image of social housing and should have been removed from Chit Chat.

The interactions and comments (left un-moderated) reinforced the negative perception about tenants and about their living conditions. Some voices and opinions of disgruntled customers were aggressive, offensive, at times inarticulate and often resentful. Such customers and the situations they mentioned are not typical of the majority of social housing tenants and how they interact with their landlord or the conditions in which they live. At times, YHN's responses were late (controversial posts had already attracted lots of additional comments and likes), ineffectual or unable to help due to limitations due to COVID or during working hours, which then just amplified the resentment and anger. Such social media interactions can become public quite easily, despite being in a closed group. Better moderation and more effective communication can avoid the impression that YHN tenants are rude, disgruntled and unreasonable, and that the organisation is uncaring and ineffectual. Managing such perceptions should be top of the list in reducing stigma in social housing.

YHN's Contact Centre is open 24 hours a day and if someone within the Centre was trained to moderate the Chit Chat site then some of the more damaging comments could be removed more quickly. The staff member could also provide telephone numbers for customers to call to address some of the more pressing problems being experienced.

Given the number of negative comments on Chit Chat SIFT members questioned its purpose, and suggested that YHN's social media strategy should consider the risk to YHN's reputation by continuing to support Chit Chat in its current lightly moderated form.

13. Mystery Shop

A SIFT member obtained addresses and phone numbers of YHN's offices from www.yhn.org.uk/our-offices. He made calls to various Housing Hubs across the 17th, 18th, 21st and 25th of June 2021.

On Thursday 17th June he called a Housing Hub at 11.42am and got played a sound of a computer/fax signal noise. He then got cut off after thirty-nine seconds.

The same day he called another hub at 11:47am and got a distorted recorded message, he chose Option 4. Recorded music played. He got cut off at 11.47am. He called again: at 3.25pm. He received a very distorted sound for menu and music. He chose Option 4, and got cut off at 3.43pm.

Also the same day at 11.50am he phoned a housing hub and received a recorded message welcoming him to Your Homes Newcastle and stating calls may be recorded

for training and reassurance purposes. When the music was playing, before the call was answered, he was told to use the website (no email address was given) and only to stay on line if the call was urgent. The call was answered at 12.15pm. The member spoke to 'A'. The SIFT member told 'A' that he was interested in buying his council house, and could he give him any information? 'A' said the name 'Right to Buy' and asked him how long he had lived in the property? He told him thirteen years. 'A' then said that he would then get up to seventy-five percent off the purchase price. He also told him to contact the Right to Buy Team at: <http://www.yhn.org.uk> and look through the menus for Right to Buy as the team are all working from home due to Covid. He said he would try but that he was not very good with computers and that he did not own one. He asked if 'A' could supply him with a telephone number. He was given 0191-2787725. He was also told to call the office back if he had any problems. 'A' was very helpful, patient and gave the SIFT member the time to ask questions. The SIFT member then thanked him for his help.

Again on Thursday 17th June the SIFT member called another office at 3.45pm: the recorded message then played. During the music playing a message said, 'Thank you for your call today, unfortunately due to circumstances beyond our control customers are experiencing longer than usual waiting times. Only stay on the line if your call is urgent. You can also access our services via our website. We are sorry for any inconvenience caused.' The call then went straight back onto music. He ended the call at 4pm without accessing a staff member.

Also on Thursday 17th June the SIFT member called a hub at 4.00pm and got a recorded message saying, 'many of our services could be accessed via <http://www.yhn.org.uk> then he got a menu of options and pressed for Option 4 to speak to the operator. He got cut off at 4.12pm. He then redialled the number at 4.12pm and listened to the recorded messages. Then got cut off at 4.22pm.

On Friday 18th June the SIFT member called a further office at 1.26pm. The recorded message then played and went on to music playing. During the music playing he was told, 'Thank you for your call today unfortunately due to circumstances beyond our control customers are experiencing longer than usual waiting times and only to stay on the line if the call was urgent. You can also access our services via our website' (no website address given). We are sorry for any inconvenience caused'. The call then went straight back onto music. The call was answered at 1.40pm.

The SIFT member did not get the gentleman's name. He said to the gentleman that he was interested in buying his home and could he give him any information. He said, 'Right to Buy' and I would have to contact the website (www.yhn.org.uk) as they were working from home due to Covid. The SIFT member said that he would try, but did not have a computer nor was he proficient with them. The staff member offered to contact them on his behalf and he could contact the office if he had problems. The gentleman he spoke to was helpful and actively listened to his questions. The SIFT member thanked the gentleman for his help and said goodbye.

Also on Friday 18th June he called a hub at 1.47pm. He rang straight off as sound/interference was so bad. He rang again at 1.50pm and got a recorded message then chose option 4. He rang off at 1.52pm due to very bad interference. He called again at 1.53pm, but rang off again as interference was getting worse as recorded music was so distorted.

Also on Friday 18th June he called a hub at 2.07pm and got the menu. He chose Option 4 again. Very distorted sound for menu and music. He got cut off at 2.16pm. He called again at 2.18pm and got the menu. He chose Option 4. Very distorted sound for menu and music. He got cut off at 2.20pm.

Again on Friday 18th June the SIFT member called another office at 2.55pm. The Recorded message then played and went straight onto music. The call was answered at 3.11pm. The phone was answered by 'B'. The SIFT member enquired about a family member who lives in a YHN managed property having to start using a electric buggy due to mobility problems and could he tell me if they would have to have a special power point or adaptor installed inside or outside their flat to be able to recharge the vehicle. He also asked if there was already an area in existence where such vehicles which could be recharged. 'B' paused to think, and then said that, 'he was not sure to be honest.' All he could suggest was to contact the supplier/manufacturer of the vehicle for more information. 'B' apologised and seemed genuinely sorry that he could not be of more help. The SIFT member thanked him for his assistance.

On Monday 21st June he called a hub at 1.56pm and the recorded message played, then he was asked to choose an option, and he chose Option 4. Music started playing. He was cut off at 4.05pm. He called again at 4.06pm, recorded messages/music as above. Cut off again at 4.15pm.

Also on Monday 21st June the SIFT member called another office at 3.35pm and the recorded message played and told the caller only to stay on the line if the call was urgent. The phone was answered at 3.43pm. The SIFT member did not catch the lady's name. He enquired about having to start using an electric buggy due to mobility problems and could she tell him if he had to have a special power point or adaptor installed inside or outside his flat to be able to recharge the vehicle.

He also asked if there was already an area in existence where such vehicles which could be recharged. He was told by the lady that she was not sure and that he would need to speak to a housing officer that worked in this office. She then stated that unless she has a name and address of the resident she could do no more. The lady was polite and friendly. The SIFT member thanked her for her help.

On Friday 25th June 2021 he called a hub at 6.34pm. He got the sound of computer/fax signal noise and then got cut off after thirty-nine seconds.

In total 17 attempts to make calls were made by the SIFT member, of those eight calls were cut off before any assistance could be given, and the caller ended one call himself because he had been on hold too long. The caller ended four of the calls because of computer or fax noise being played. One member of staff stated that they could not help the caller without a name and address, yet the call was for general information. Another member of staff regrettably could not help because they did not have the information the caller needed, yet again it was an enquiry about general information.

The caller felt that one member of staff had been very helpful and provided the information he needed, however it should be noted that the staff member asked how long the caller had lived in his property, when the correct question should have been 'how many years have you been a council tenant?' The staff member also told the caller that he would get up to seventy-five percent discount, whereas the government's discount site calculator states that the discount would be sixty-six percent.

14. Newcastle City Council's Fairer Housing Unit

The Fairer Housing Unit commissioned a Housing Insights and Investment Study in 2019 which raised the issue of tackling stigma. Stigma was having a significant impact on the sector's ability to attract a diverse range of tenants and recommended that the Council should consider publishing case studies of different types of tenants and how their needs have been met. The Unit had plans to work with YHN on how it marketed the various housing options, including Council housing, and publishing service standards.

However, this piece of work has not started yet so the recommendation about case studies will need to be reconsidered. One thing the Unit could explore is publishing case studies in Citylife, and to place biteable videos on NCC's social media sites. The



Unit could ask the Chronicle to run some stories, but of course it is up to them what they publish.

The Fairer Housing Unit has stated that it would be interested in SIFT's views on where these case studies should be publicised to maximise the audience. SIFT's views about the things that should be included in case studies that shows Council housing and Council tenants in a positive light would be helpful. SIFT members will forward their ideas in the near future.

15. Conclusions

The stigmatisation of social housing has happened over a period of time, with government policy, economic, social and cultural changes in society, the influence of the media and the quality of the built environment all playing a part in influencing the levels of stigma.

YHN have proactive policies in place to attempt to reduce stigma, however they cannot influence how the local press portray council tenants.

The Fairer Housing Unit will develop a programme of publicising positive stories about its tenants on its social media and in Citylife.

The White Paper, the charter for social housing tenants, proposes the levels of respect between social housing tenants and landlords should be at the heart of service delivery. It also proposes the strengthening of regulation. Both YHN and NCC will need to put in place policies and practices to comply with the changes in regulation.

The Fair Press Guide and the 'See the Person' campaign are both attempting to combat the levels of stigma associated with social housing and combat the negative impacts of that stigma on tenants. YHN and NCC comply with the Fair press guidelines.

YHN's Chit Chat pages record some negative, un-moderated comments about the organisation, which may contribute to the image of the organisation being damaged in the eyes of its customers. Staff from YHN's Contact Centre could be trained to moderate the site when mainline staff's working hours are finished.

The mystery shopping exercise produced results which echoed the comments made to SIFT members from tenants about accessing service delivery during the pandemic, that is, it is sometimes difficult to get in touch with staff members or access accurate information. Access levels may also damage YHN's reputation and that in itself could reinforce a view that social housing is not the most desirable form of tenure.

This report was prepared by:

Ashleigh Fullwood

Liviu Popoviciu

Paul Wharrier

Jana Williams

Fiona Leslie

Albert Brydon

Kim Simmonds

Andrew Perks

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July 2021



Recommendation	Management Response	Proposed Actions	Timescale	Responsibility
1. Both YHN and NCC should publicise positive stories about tenants in their social media and publications.				
2. YHN and NCC should publicise using a variety of methods the 'See the Person' campaign so that tenants can be made more aware of the true levels of stigmatisation.				
3. Information about changes to policies and practices as a result of the proposals in the White Paper should be discussed with tenants.				
4. YHN should review its social media strategy to ensure that comments on Chit Chat are not contributing to harmful stigmatisation.				
5. YHN should review how it communicates customers and how customers communicate with it.				
6. YHN's Contact Centre staff could be trained to moderate the Chit Chat site.				