

Scrutiny Question: Does the Tenancy Pack provide sufficient and relevant information for new tenants to sustain their tenancy effectively?

1. Why we chose to scrutinise this topic

There has been some discussion between SIFT members and senior figures in the Fairer Housing Unit about 'hard to let' properties and tenants sustaining their tenancy in the longer term. SIFT members wished to explore if sufficient information and support is provided at the inception of tenancies to help maintain them. Members see the Tenancy Pack as being one of the tools which helps this maintenance.

2. Scope of the Review

SIFT set a clear scope for the scrutiny, which is:

- To explore the contents of the Tenancy Pack to assess for relevant and up to date information
- To identify if tenants retain the Pack and use it
- To assess how YHN updates the Pack
- To recommend changes to policy and practice where required.

3. How we scrutinised this service area

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

- Briefing by the lead officers
- Contents of the Pack
- Review of the Home Standard
- Changes to Legislation and Regulation
- Compare and contrast the paper Pack to online and digital information
- Compare and contrast different versions of the Tenancy Pack
- Tenant Survey
- Benchmarking.

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. Factors to consider in completing the scrutiny

In order to assist in the scrutiny of the Tenancy Pack SIFT members received copies of various forms several weeks before the start of the scrutiny, they included:

- The Tenancy Agreement
- A sheet containing useful contact numbers
- The Tenancy Sign Up Checklist
- A copy of the Property lettings standard
- A Follow-Up Visit Form, a Property inspection form
- A New Tenant and Rent Information for Housing Services Officer and Income Collection Officer form.

This information was compared against the Tenancy Pack issued in 2016 and was found to be far less comprehensive in terms of information and support for new tenants.

6. Briefing by Lead Officers, Helen Rowley and Sarah Walker, Housing Services Managers

The two officers are responsible for managing two areas of the city, namely Kenton and the East End, and they described their role to SIFT members to set the scene. Sarah stated that she had 10 Neighbourhood Officers on her team who were responsible for 10 management patches.

She went on to explain that the sign up process has changed over the years: staff had to consider the legal requirements of the different types of tenancy, for example, secure or assured tenancy and that the two tenancies have slightly different rights.

Sarah stated that YHN felt that the Tenancy Handbook used in the past was cumbersome and out of date at print, plus it was expensive to produce and often found unread or unopened. SIFT members questioned how the officers knew that the Packs were found unread or unopened, that is, how many are found in this way? (A subsequent query was forwarded to the managers and the reply identified that anecdotal evidence was provided by staff entering empty homes, there is no hard evidence that the Packs are not read.)

Both managers stated that there is a drive in YHN to simplify the sign up process for the customer by completing the sign up in most cases in the tenant's new home, rather than an Area Office, and that much of what was contained in the old Tenancy Pack was talked through in the new home.

Sarah emphasised that accessibility to staff was explained to new tenants and they were urged to talk to their Housing Services Officer for one-to-one support. She also described that online services were available for customers to access information about specific aspects of the housing service, and that they had direct access to the Call Centre for support.

The managers then went on to discuss the Social Housing White Paper which has placed an emphasis on transparency and accountability of and by social landlords, and that YHN is putting in place measures to ensure that they meet the requirements of the Paper.

Sarah then explained the 'customer journey' to accessing a home, this included the following stages:

- Application for Rehousing or Transfer
- Assessment of Customers' Housing Needs
- Application Banded and Made Live
- Customer Bids – Tyne and Wear Homes
- Shortlisting
- Offer, Viewing, Sign Up.

Documents given to customers at sign up should include:

- Lettable Standard – discussed and agreed
- Newcastle Furniture Service
- Tenancy Agreement discussed:
 - Rent
 - Behaviour
 - Repairs
 - Alterations
- Copy of EPC and CP12 issued
- Health and Safety/Fire Leaflet (currently being refreshed)
- Home Contents Insurance - Leaflet
- Garden Service Referral
- OSTARA Referral
- Support and Progression Referral
- Financial Inclusion Referral
- Employability Team Referral
- Caretaker Introduction (If possible)
- Resident Groups

It should be noted that SIFT members did not receive information about the Furniture Service or copies of the EPC and CP12 or the Health and Safety/Fire Leaflet, the Home Contents insurance leaflet or any information about Residents' Groups in the information they were sent prior to commencing the scrutiny.

Both managers demonstrated that they were enthusiastic about providing a good service and had the interest of customers at heart. They stated that they wanted to provide a service which helped tenants sustain their tenancy, and where possible, they made arrangements so that problems with the property could be overcome, for example making small changes to kitchens or bathrooms.

7. Review of the Regulatory Home Standard

The Regulatory Home Standard includes required outcomes with regard to the quality of accommodation and repairs and maintenance. Registered providers shall ensure that tenants' homes meet the standard set out in section five of the Government's Decent Homes Guidance and continue to maintain their homes to at least this standard.

Section five of the Guidance states that the Housing Health and Safety Rating System should be complied with. The System identifies 29 hazards. To be decent, a dwelling should be free of category 1 hazards, and the existence of such hazards should be a trigger for remedial action unless practical steps cannot be taken without disproportionate expense or disruption.

Category 1 hazards in a property are assessed against the severity of the hazard and its potential to actually occur and harm an individual, they include:

- Damp and mould
- Excess cold
- Excess heat
- Asbestos and MMF
- Ergonomics
- Biocides, etc.

From the paperwork sent to SIFT members before the scrutiny commenced it is clear from the 'Property lettings standard' document that the properties are treated for damp, but there is no mention of removing mould: an Energy Performance Certificate is available (but not yet issued), but the property is not checked for excess cold or heat.

SIFT members think that the Property lettings standard should clearly state that mould will be removed and that an EPC is issued to the tenant at the tenancy sign up.

Perhaps a brief leaflet describing the Decent Homes Standard could be developed and given to customers at the sign up session; this would enable customers to check for themselves that if the property meets the required standard.

SIFT members queried how existing customers found out about changes in policy, practice and service (one member still had his Tenancy Pack given out 20 years ago, which had never been updated).

In an exercise to find the housing information duplicated in the old Pack that Sarah said could be found on line, SIFT members found both YHN's and NCC's websites did not easily navigate to, for example, the Housing Ombudsman Service. In addition YHN's website does not have a 'search for' tab, only a magnifying glass symbol which the user has to click on to find a search box, which is somewhat confusing as this symbol is often used to increase the size of text, not to search.

8. Tenant Satisfaction Survey of the service

SIFT members wanted to conduct a survey of tenants who had signed up to their tenancy in the last six months. In order to do this SIFT had to ask YHN to circulate a Survey Monkey link to its customers via social media.

In the last six months YHN have signed up 748 new tenancies across general needs and Housing Plus.

- 676 were general needs tenancies
- 72 were Housing Plus tenancies.

Potentially then there were 748 responses to the survey, however not all customers have access to social media. Disappointingly only six responses were received from customers.

A valid statistical analysis of the six returns could not be determined as there were far too few; however the response rates are included in the report at Appendix A.

SIFT members would like to explore with YHN's Engagement Team and NCC's Fairer Housing Unit how they can more effectively access YHN's customers in future surveys.

9. Benchmarking

Three different social landlords' Tenants' introductory information was reviewed as part of the benchmarking exercise, namely:

- South Tyneside Council/South Tyneside Homes
- Gateshead Council
- Gentoo Housing Association.

Follow the links to see copies of the landlords' information.

South Tyneside Council/South Tyneside Homes

[Benchmarking\Tenants_Handbook_A5.pdf](#)

Gateshead Council Information

<https://www.gateshead.gov.uk/article/13591/Know-your-rights-as-a-tenant>

Gentoo Housing Association

<https://www.dropbox.com/s/j9e9hc0e8ejhvzi/Gentoo%20tenant-handbook.pdf?dl=0>

Benchmarking Summary

South Tyneside and Gentoo's Handbooks clearly explain a range of relevant information with helpful accompanying photographs. Both books are welcoming and have a professional finish to them, demonstrating that tenants are valued by the landlord.

Gateshead Council provide information for tenants online and in a leaflet, the information is easily accessible and clearly set out.

When comparing YHN's information for new tenants to those of the three benchmarked social landlords the information is found to be somewhat brief and not comprehensive.

10. Complaints

In the last year YHN received one complaint that specifically mentions the sign up process.

The customer said they felt they were treated unfairly during the sign up process. The issues were actually around the condition of the property on moving in. The complaint was investigated but after an investigation, the complaint was not upheld.

Given that no information about how to complain is provided to new tenants it is not surprising that only one complaint had been received in the last six months. Additionally new tenants may not be aware that a complaint may be interpreted as a request for service, rather than a formal complaint.

11. Findings

The Tenancy Agreement is largely well laid out and clearly states the terms of the tenancy, it does not however include details about the Right to Manage in the section on Tenants' Rights. This is a major right for secure tenants of local authorities and should immediately be included in the Tenancy Agreement.

The contents and style of the Tenancy Pack has changed radically since 2016. The reasons stated for this change is the excess cost of producing the pack and the fact that often information is out of date quite quickly.

SIFT members were informed that much of the information contained in the old Pack could be found on either YHN or NCC's websites, however both sites do not contain all of the previously detailed information, for example, the 'Get Involved' page of YHN's site mentions the Customer Service Committee, but does not mention an opportunity to be part of SIFT or NiTV.

On accessing NCC's website a user has to click on the 'view more services' link before 'Housing' appears and then the only option is to apply for a home. The search option brings up NiTV as a result when inputting 'Tenant Involvement' as a query, but does not mention SIFT.

The information currently provided to new tenants does not include information about how the heating works or, if appropriate how the intercom works. The 'Property lettings standard' does mention that 'The engineer will discuss how to use the boiler at the gas safety check when you move into your home.' The safety check does not happen on the day a tenant moves into the property and therefore it could be some time before they know how to use the heating properly.

Currently no information about the Health and Safety lead is provided or about the Safer Living Team.

In the 'Property lettings standard' there is no mention of:

- Whether your home is thermally efficient
- The Decent Homes Standard

The 'New Tenant and Rent Information for Housing Service Officers and Income Collection Officers' form still lists Concierge on the sheet rather than Caretaker. This should be amended as there is still quite a lot of confusion about how the service is provided.

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Acknowledgements

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

From Your Homes Newcastle

Rachel Tyler
Emily Sinclair
Helen Rowley
Sarah Walker

From Newcastle City Council

Fiona Dodsworth

From Engage Associates

Eileen Adams

And all of the tenants who took part in the scrutiny



Recommendations	Management Response	Proposed Actions	Timescale	Responsibility
1. The Right to Manage should be included in the 'rights' section of the Tenancy Agreement				
2. Both NCC's and YHN's websites should be checked for ease of access to previously printed information and make YHN's search facility clearer				
3. NCC's and YHN's websites should be updated and refer to the CSC, SIFT and NiTV				
4. Details on how the heating works should be provided at the sign up, in addition a leaflet on how the boiler works should be provided				
5. Where appropriate, how the intercom works should be explained at sign up				
6. The 'New Tenant and Rent Information' form should be updated to remove the word concierge from it and replaced with caretaker				



Recommendations	Management Response	Proposed Actions	Timescale	Responsibility
7. The Decent Homes Standard should be explained to tenants at sign up and a brief checklist of items included with the paperwork				
8. YHN's Engagement Team and NCC's Fairer Housing Unit should work with SIFT to explore how they can more effectively access YHN's customers in future surveys				
9. An online brochure for new tenants similar to those produced by South Tyneside and Gentoo should be developed.				



Appendix A Survey Questions and Results

1.	When did you take up your tenancy?					
	1 month ago 2	2 months ago	3 months ago 1	4 months ago	5 months ago	6 months ago 3
2.	Have you been a council tenant before?					
	Yes 4		No 2			
3.	Where did you sign your tenancy agreement?					
	In the housing office		At your new home 6			
4.	How long did you spend with the Housing Officer during the sign up?					
	Time ½ hour	3 hours	1 hour	40 minutes	10 minutes	1 minute
5.	Do you think everything about the tenancy was explained to you clearly?					
	Yes 3		No 3			
6.	Do you think YHN has complied with the terms of the tenancy agreement?					
	Yes 1		No 5			
7.	Do you think your Housing Officer has been helpful since you signed your tenancy agreement?					
	Yes 3		No 3			



8.	Were you shown how to use the heating system by the Housing Officer?		
	Yes	No	
	2	4	
9.	Were you shown how to use the intercom system by the Housing Officer?		
	Yes	No	
	2	4	
10.	Were you helped to maximise your income to sustain your tenancy by the Housing Officer?		
	Yes	No	
	2	4	