



Scrutiny Panel Project - Current Standard of Empty Homes (Voids) When Re-let

“What do customers think about the current standard of our homes when re-let and do we need to improve this?”

Executive Summary:

- Customers expect a certain level of cleanliness when they move into their home
- Customers often want to redecorate themselves when moving in and some would appreciate help with this
- There is a need for assistance and support when customers first move into their home, especially with carpets and furniture
- Customers expect the outside space to be of the same standard that they are expected to maintain, and for it to be a safe environment
- There is an expectation that basic facilities, such as heat, hot water and bathroom are in working order when they move in

Introduction:

Who are the scrutiny panel?

We are a group of customers from different areas of SYHA. Some of us are tenants, some of us have been on the Good Work programme, and one of us is on the board.

We've got different life experiences, and this brings different perspectives to the scrutiny panel. We're different ages, from different parts of South Yorkshire, different genders, have different religions and are from different ethnic and racial backgrounds.

As a group, we've been running for over 2 years, but some members have considerable experience of scrutiny in its different forms at SYHA for over 6 years.

"I want to use my spare time to help people and use my ideas to do something about the issues people are facing. It's my contribution to life."

We're involved in scrutiny for different reasons:

- We're all nosy/curious
- We're all tenants (even if not a SYHA tenant)
- We want to make a difference for all tenants

Why did we look at the standard of empty homes (voids) when re-let?

When a property becomes empty, and before it can be re-let there is a minimum standard it must meet called a **lettable void standard**. We decided this needed looking at to see if there was a **variable standard** when customers first moved in and if we were doing enough to help customers settle into their new homes.

We felt that when customers moved into their home it should be **clean** and in a **liveable condition** and that this should be a **basic right for everyone**. Things are really hard for people at the moment, and we wanted to know what was important to customers, what they needed support with and how we could help them with this.

We wanted to make sure contractors were maintaining a certain standard of work. We had looked at the standard of empty homes when re-let previously when the work was carried out by SYHA operatives only and we were also interested to know if anything had changed.

*"We wanted to know that what was currently being done was the best **value for money** for SYHA and customers."*

What were the aims/objectives of the exercise?

We met with Shelley Naylor (Head of maintenance) and Tim Crawford (Income and Lettings Manager) to understand what was currently being done and the following documents were shared with us:

- current lettable void standard spreadsheet
- decorating pack information
- tenancy sign-up pack

We also followed 4 properties from the time the keys were handed in to when they were re-let so we could have a better understanding of the condition properties were left in and how they looked when re-let. We visited some of the properties so we could see for ourselves and also looked at photos.

We discussed everything that had been shared and used this as a basis to form our key research question: *“What do customers think about the current standard of our homes when re-let and how can we help them settle in their new home?”*

We decided to focus our project on general needs customers and wanted to achieve this outcome: *“All customers should move into a clean home in a liveable condition and be made aware of additional resources available.”*

We recognise that not everyone can afford to paint their house when they move in, and it can cost a lot of money. We want customers to have a home to move into without them having the pressure of cleaning and redecorating a full house and to help them with this if we can. We want all customers to have the best start they can with SYHA, and that extra help and support is given, if needed.

We decided we needed to ask customers how satisfied they were with the standard of their new home when they moved in and ask them what was important to them.

“It is important that all customers are treated equally and that this will help reduce any stigma involved in needing additional help.”

What we did – our methodology:

How did we decide which questions to ask?

We read through the documents that had been shared with us, starting with the **current lettable void spreadsheet** and were interested to see if everything on this was being carried out, in particular, the cleaning of the property and how well this was being done. We noted that on the spreadsheet **all surfaces (walls, floors, worktops etc.) to be clean, grease and dust free including insides** was one of the tasks listed. Some of the empty properties we had followed did not seem as clean

as we would have expected, and we wanted to know if this was a problem for customers.

We saw **'where there are fitted carpets that are well fitted/ whole and clean, leave in property'**. The majority of times we saw **'removed but rarely kept'** was listed and wondered if we should be helping customers more by leaving window dressings and floor coverings in. When we moved into our SYHA homes some of us had concrete floors for the first few months and would have benefitted from flooring already being in the property. We noticed one of the empty homes we had followed at the beginning of this exercise had good quality laminate flooring and blinds and we were surprised that these are sometimes removed from properties.

We also discussed whether customers would be interested in receiving furniture and goods left in the property. We asked Shelley and Tim for more information about this and found there was a **furniture package** that customers could have at the start of their tenancy with the cost added to their rent. We wondered how many customers were aware of this and if they would be interested in receiving it.

We noticed in the lettable void **'standard remove all rubbish/ furniture and non-appropriate fittings from the property unless otherwise instructed'**. **'Property service officer to apply discretion'** was listed and we wanted to know what happened to any furniture that was left – was it given to a charity, recycled, or thrown away? We were told that it would be difficult to keep items to reuse as there wasn't a lot of storage space and that we didn't always recycle furniture and that sometimes the condition wasn't good enough to do this. We wanted to know if customers wanted the option to have recycled furniture.

We were aware SYHA were sometimes decorating houses before being re-let and this cost approx. £2,000 for a 3-bed property and we discussed whether this was the **best value for money**. Decorating packs were sometimes given to customers to paint the property themselves and in comparison, cost £150 for the same size property. We wanted to know what customers' expectations were around decoration when they moved into a SHYA home and if they had been given packs, were they satisfied with them?

We noted that not all **gardens and outside space** were in an **acceptable standard** when left and didn't look much different when the new customer moved in, this surprised us. We were told that NEAT usually try and do this work straight away where possible, but it may take up to 3 weeks and we wondered if customers were happy with this.

We decided a **brief survey** would be the best way to collect feedback from customers and decided to use **Viewpoint**, a survey company, that specialises in carrying out surveys in the housing sector. We used previous training from TPAS and took advice from the customer experience team at SYHA when phrasing the

questions. We carried out a smaller survey to ask the customers who had used decorating packs what they thought but this was done by the SYHA customer experience team.

How did we choose which customers to contact?

When deciding who to survey we chose to contact customers who had started a **new tenancy** with SYHA in the **last 12 months**, as we felt they would still clearly remember what the process was like for them and feel it relevant to their journey. Therefore, they would want to tell us what they thought.

We decided to go with a **telephone-only survey**, as we thought more people would respond to a phone call than email and would also share more details this way. We asked Viewpoint to stop when they had received 100 responses as we felt this would give a good insight into how customers were feeling. Viewpoint succeeded in obtaining the **100 responses** we asked for and as we had had such a good response rate we didn't feel the need to contact involved customers.

Survey Incentive

We decided rather than offer a small incentive for each person who completed the survey it would be more inviting to do a prize draw with a higher incentive and that this would increase the response rate.

We offered:

- £100 – for the Viewpoint survey
- £25 – for the decorating pack survey

Findings:

We were pleased with the response rate we received from both surveys. We based our findings on a score of 7,8,9 or 10 as being satisfied, as this aligns with SYHA transactional surveys.

Standard of Cleanliness

**“It was spotless and in good condition” and
“It was clean and ready for me to move in.”**

We were pleased that most customers told us they were **satisfied with how clean their new home was (90%)**.

However, even customers who scored us highly still told us about issues with cleanliness and this was concerning. One customer scored us an 8 but then said **“The toilet wasn't cleaned at all before I moved in.”** Another customer who scored us a 9 told us **“Was in a good condition but had to replace a kitchen unit that was chewed and urine damaged.”**

We were disappointed by these comments and strongly believe properties should be **cleaned to a reasonable standard**, as promised on both the **lettable void spreadsheet** and the **Tenancy sign-up pack**, prior to someone moving in. We were particularly concerned that toilets were not cleaned, that urine damage was an issue and what the health and safety implications would be.

Standard of decoration

We found fewer people were **satisfied with the standard of decoration in their new home (73%)** compared to cleanliness, with some customers scoring lowly due to the standard of the previous décor and

“I had to do a lot of decorating on the walls and the paper was really hard to cover”

mentioning **strong, bright colours** that were **hard to decorate over**. This tells us that customers would like the option to cover decoration that is not to their taste and don't want to always live with someone else's decorating choices. Some customers told us they decided to decorate once they had moved in, one customer said, **“It was to a low standard but have updated it myself.”** Another commented, **“Slightly mucky not newly decorated but did it ourselves.”**

We surveyed customers who had been given decorating packs and **84%** said they were given enough paint for the size of the property; one customer told us **“It was good quality, and I was pleased with the choice of colour but there wasn't enough for the size of my property”** and **“Some walls needed 2 or 3 coats of paint as I think the previous person smoked and my hallway is above average size.”** If a decorating pack is given this should be considered and extra paint given, if needed. All customers we surveyed were satisfied with the quality and choice of colour and customers were **grateful for the help.**

“It was a great asset and saved me so much money. I was very thankful” and **“I think it's brilliant!”**

We believe all customers should be offered a decorating pack, if needed and **73%** told us they felt they would have **benefitted from this**. We also feel consideration should be given to customers unable to decorate themselves, with help offered. We think some customers would benefit from advice on how to decorate as they may not have done it before or have someone they can ask.

Standard of outside space

Most customers scored us **highly (69%)** for the standard of outside space when they moved into their new home however, there were still some concerns, particularly around health and safety. **“The garden was overgrown containing dog mess and rubbish. I paid to have the garden sorted myself.”**

“The space itself is amazing, an 8 on its own, but there was a lot of work that needed doing as all slabs were loose and very damaged fencing, dangerous to let kids out on their own.”

We feel that the garden and outside space should be in a **manageable condition**

for when the customer

moves in and in particular, when a customer has children or pets or where it might be unsafe. We are concerned that SYHA’s reputation could be damaged by how the property looks, as the outside can be seen by everyone else in the area. This could also deter other existing customers from keeping their outside space to a good standard.

“When we moved in the back garden need cutting back and any needles removed. This has been done and we had a new fence, this did take a while to get done.”

Furniture

We asked customers if they would be interested in **purchasing a furniture package** with the costs added onto their rent account and **54%** of customers told us they would, plus another **4%** said they wouldn’t want one themselves but that it may benefit others.

Out of the **46%** that answered no to this question, only **5%** said they would be worried about additional costs **“It would have put my rent up a lot, and I would have been paying it off forever.”** Some customers said they wouldn’t be interested as they already had their own items. Most customers would consider the option of a furniture package if this was offered, and we think it is important that all new customers are made aware they are available. If all customers are made aware of

this, it removes any stigma around it.

“I would like to have known about the furniture etc as I am moving into my first home and the things I had would not fit”

48% of customers told us they would have liked the option to **keep flooring and window dressings** from the previous customer. This is a large cost to customers when first moving in and many customers would appreciate help with this. We think SYHA should be mindful of the cost of moving into a new home and try to alleviate this expense.

“It will help to provide additional support and furniture to tenants in need.”

53% of customers also told us they would be interested in receiving recycled furniture from previous customers, free of charge. We believe it is important that SYHA should be doing more to **reduce the waste of reusable items**, particularly in the current cost of living crisis and more charities need furniture to resell.

Other issues

Some customers, although not directly asked told us about issues with damp in their home when they moved in. **“There was mould growing in the bedroom when I got there.”** another told us **“There is mould in this home, in more than one place.”** We were shocked that this hadn't been treated before the customer moved in.

“There was mould in the property, and it was not in a suitable condition to rent out to someone.”

We also noted that 2 out of 4 of the properties we had followed had quite major repairs that needed doing as soon as the customer moved in, one having no heat or hot water and the other not having a shower that worked. We think that repairs like this should be checked before moving in, in particular in homes where more vulnerable customers live.

Recommendations:

Based on your findings from looking at void properties and survey results, what do you recommend that SYHA do to improve the situation?

- If cleaning and repairs that are part of the lettable void standard haven't been carried out properly, contractors should be asked to redo, and the property should be inspected to ensure the work has been done before handed over to lettings.
- Homes should have heat, hot water and bathroom facilities that work when a customer moves in, and this should be checked.

- If damp or mould is present in a property this should be treated before the customer moves in
- Improved training for operatives to carry out cleaning to a higher standard or look at employing a cleaning team.
- The decorating pack should be offered to all customers, if needed, as a cost-effective way to alleviate the expense to SYHA of decorating the property. More paint be made available if needed and consideration is given to those who are unable to decorate themselves, by either offering support or advice.
- The garden and outside space should be of a presentable standard that can be easily maintained by the customer, before moving in, if possible. Health and safety issues should be a high priority.
- The option to be made available to all customers to keep existing flooring and window dressings with a disclaimer. Ensure this is a high standard to reduce the chance of compensation claims.
- Ensure the furniture packs are offered to all customers and this should be part of the tenancy sign-up pack to avoid any embarrassment to the customer
- Make it known to the previous customer if they have furniture that is in a reusable condition this can be left in the property. Arrange for this furniture to be collected by a charity and not thrown away. Negotiate with a chosen charity.

How does the scrutiny panel want to follow this up?

- Work with customer experience to monitor new tenancy satisfaction survey scores
- Carry out impromptu before and after spot checks on void properties
- Monitor the uptake on decorating packs and furniture packages
- Monitor how much furniture has been recycled

How do you want to communicate changes to customers?

- SYHA website and social media

Is there anything you've learned from this process that you will use for future scrutiny projects?

- Using Viewpoint to carry out the surveys increased the response rate
- By targeting the relevant customers, you can get better-quality data
- By having a more focused approach the task can be shortened

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Copy of survey sent to customers

Scrutiny Panel Survey Looking at the Standard of Empty Homes when Re-let

SYHA's Scrutiny Panel are doing a project looking at the current standard of empty homes when re-let. The Scrutiny Panel are a group of customers, who meet regularly online to explore, investigate, and improve different areas of the organisation. Their role is to hold South Yorkshire Housing Association accountable, challenge the way things are done and offer recommendations.

You have moved into a South Yorkshire Housing Association property, in the past 12 months and the panel would like to hear your feedback about what was important to you and helped you settle in your new home. The survey is anonymous and the information from this survey will be used to inform SYHA's Scrutiny Panel work on the current standard of empty homes when re-let.

Direct quotes may be used in the report we produce, but quotes will be anonymised. This may be shared within SYHA and externally on our website, social media and with external partners.

SYHA will store and process your data in accordance with the requirements of its Data Protection Policy and in keeping with the UK General Data Protection Regulation 2018.

Everyone that shares their thoughts is entered into a prize draw for a chance to **win £100 in retail gift vouchers.**

Q1. On a scale of 1-10, with 1 being very dissatisfied and 10 being very satisfied, what score would you give for the **cleanliness** of your new home when you moved in?

Please can you tell us why you have given that score?

Q2. On a scale of 1-10, with 1 being very dissatisfied and 10 being very satisfied, what score would you give for the **standard of decoration** in your new home when you moved in?

Please can you tell us why you have given that score?

Q3. Do you think you would have benefitted from receiving a free of charge decorating pack from SYHA? Y/N

(A decorating pack contains limited choice of paint and sundries, quantity dependant of the size of property and is free)

Q4. On a scale of 1-10, with 1 being very dissatisfied and 10 being very satisfied, what score would you give for the **standard of outdoor space** at your new home when you moved in?

Please can you tell us why you have given that score?

Q5. Would you have been interested in the option to purchase a furniture package from SYHA, with payment for this added to your rent?

(furniture package could include White goods, carpets, wardrobe, sofa, dining table and chairs, don't have to have the whole package)

Y/N

If no, why?

Q6. Would you have liked the option to keep any flooring and window décor from the previous tenants?

Y/N

If no, why?

Q7. Would you have been interested in receiving recycled furniture from previous SYHA customers, free of charge?

y/n

If no, why?

Q8. Is there anything else you would like to share about the lettings process?

Decorating Pack Survey Questions

Q1. Were you given enough paint for the size of your property?

Q2. Were you happy with the quality of the paint provided?

Q3. Were you happy with the choices of paint colour?