

# NORTH STAR



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**Creating homes, building futures**





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**W**elcome to the new edition of our magazine, which we hope provides some helpful updates and information. We would love to hear what you think and how we can improve everything we do including the magazine and its content.

We thank you for your patience during the pandemic, it has been a challenging time for us all. We are pleased that service delivery has pretty much returned to normal, and our new build work and investment in existing homes runs at pace. Our work with communities continues and our technology is fast developing, to not only provide improved accessible and speedy services but to deliver efficiencies. As you know North Star is a not-for-profit organisation and all surplus is invested back into the business.

### Focus On... Ruth Sunter a key member of our Customer Services Team

#### What's your job role and in brief, what does this entail?

I'm a Customer Services Team member. We are first point of call for our customers and we aim to resolve any queries on first contact wherever possible. Every day is different, but on a regular day I will take calls from customers to pay their rent, rent account queries, investigate and raise repairs, and much more besides that.

#### Where did you work before North Star?

I worked for a small Housing Association based in Darlington as an Admin Assistant to the Housing Officer and the Office Manager. North Star became our managing agent in 2011, and in 2016 we joined the North Star Group.

It has been a year of awards for North Star, with some prestigious national employer ones that are a welcome endorsement of how we operate, with people at our heart. The environmental agenda is of critical importance and North Star is committed to this agenda; within the organisation there is a lot of activity going on but always more to do.

Please do let us know what we do well, what needs improving and what its like being a tenant. We value feedback as this helps us to move forward and be the best we can.

[feedback@northstarhg.co.uk](mailto:feedback@northstarhg.co.uk)

Best wishes  
**Angela Lockwood,**  
Chief Executive

In 2018 I became a member of North Star Customer Services Team.

#### What are your hobbies/interests?

I like to watch movies and I like to listen to music of all kinds.

#### What is your favourite:

**Film?** Signs  
**Book?** The Girl on the Train  
**Holiday destination?** New York  
**Food?** Chinese food especially noodles

#### Tell us an interesting fact about yourself

I'm a big Sci-fi/Supernatural fan

**NEW**  
*For You*



## Recipe Ideas

Tenants have asked that we include cooking tips and ideas in our magazine, particularly for people on a tight budget and those living alone. We work regularly with Stockton based community food charity Sprouts, an award-winning charity dedicated to improving the health and wellbeing of our community. They have extensive experience of providing healthy meals on a budget.

### Lasagne

#### TOMATO SAUCE

##### Ingredients

- 1 tablespoon oil
- 1 onion peeled and chopped
- 2 cloves of garlic peeled and chopped
- 1 x 400g tin of tomatoes
- 2 tablespoons of tomato puree

##### Method

1. Heat oil in a saucepan and add onions and garlic, cook on a medium heat until onions have softened but not browned.
2. Add the tinned tomatoes and tomato puree cook gently for 20 mins, stirring occasionally

#### LASAGNE

##### Ingredients

- 1 portion of tomato sauce
- 1 portion of white sauce
- 200g mince
- 50g lasagne sheets
- 30g cheese

##### Method

1. Preheat the oven to 180°C/ Fan 160°C / gas 4
2. Brown mince in a pan
3. Add tomato sauce

4. Put a layer of the mixture in the bottom of an oven proof dish
5. Add a layer of lasagne sheets top with white sauce
6. Top with more mixture, then lasagne sheets, white sauce
7. Keep alternating until mixture is all used
8. After the last lasagne sheet, top with white sauce and grated cheese
9. Bake in the oven for 20 mins

#### WHITE SAUCE (BÉCHAMEL SAUCE)

##### Ingredients

- 30g unsalted butter
- 30g plain flour
- 300ml/1 pint skimmed milk

##### Method (hob)

1. Melt butter in saucepan over moderate heat
2. Add flour and beat till smooth, remove from heat
3. Add the milk a little at a time and beat well
4. Bring to boil and gently cook for 2-3 minutes

##### Method (microwave)

1. Place all the ingredients in microwave bowl
2. Heat in 30 second intervals, stirring in between
3. Remove once thickened



NEW  
For You

Featured Scheme:

# WORSLEY PARK DARLINGTON

In the last North Star magazine, unfortunately, we wrongly attributed some fantastic pictures of the gardens at our Worsley Park scheme in Darlington to our Aspen Gardens scheme in Stockton. In this edition we would like to focus on the fantastic scheme at Worsley Park and the brilliant work the residents have done in the gardens.

Worsley Park is a sheltered housing scheme for over 60s, opened in 1989 and situated in the west end of Darlington.

There is a good bus service which runs from Nunnery Lane. Mowden and Cockerton are the nearest shopping centres which are five minutes away by bus. Darlington town centre is 15 minutes away by bus. Across the road on Cardinal Gardens is Carmel Surgery and next to it there is a pharmacy.

Facilities include:

- Communal lounge with kitchen
- Communal laundry
- Library
- Lift
- Guest room

- Landscape gardens
- Hairdresser

There are a number of social activities including bingo and fish and chip lunches as well as the fantastic work the residents have done in the gardens.

Susan Gray, Scheme Manager at Worsley Park told us:

'Our garden is the pride and joy of our tenants. We have a few avid gardeners who are out there working daily. Some of the tenants have donated money to our gardeners to buy plants.

'The pictures do not do it the justice it deserves. The work they have done has got them all through covid and helped with the promotion of our service to potential new tenants. The garden is often the first thing they mention.'

We would like to apologise to the tenants at Worsley Park for the mistake in the last magazine and also thank them for all their hard work in making the gardens look so beautiful.



We are currently running a pilot scheme with staff in conjunction with Barclays, aimed at improving digital skills.

Digital Wings, which is part of Barclay's very successful programme, Digital Eagles, allows people to learn new skills in a practical way and at their own speed.

We are looking to give our customers access to the system in 2022 and if you would be interested in joining the programme, email our Head of ICT and Digital - Sean Lawless at [sean.lawless@northstarhg.co.uk](mailto:sean.lawless@northstarhg.co.uk) or call 01642 796287.

Here is some further detail on the Digital Wings programme:

#### Empowering you to embrace technology

Barclays Digital Wings is the place to learn about all things digital - from how to stay safe online and navigate social media to managing your money or your business.

We developed this online training in 2013 for our colleagues. Since then, it's been a great success with heaps of positive feedback, so we've opened it up to everyone.

#### Why learn with digital wings?

Whether you're just discovering the basics, looking to learn more about new trends, or even get into coding, our ever-evolving suite of learning will keep you up to speed. Our tutorials, videos, games and quizzes are all designed to boost your knowledge and sharpen your skills.

Best of all, it's free.

#### Learning on the go - together

It's easy to squeeze in learning anytime, anywhere. Just log in to Barclays Digital Wings online or download our app.

As you complete modules, you'll earn badges and points. You can even create a league table with people you know - there's nothing like a little friendly competition to motivate learning!



NEW  
For You

# BEATING THE WINTER BLUES

It felt like summer was just about to start. Then, all of a sudden, the days started to get shorter, you can't head out without taking a coat, and the family has started asking what your Christmas plans are. How is it December already?

December can be great but, lots of us can often feel a bit down too – with a lack of motivation, tiredness, and just general glumness.

This is a really common feeling for lots of people of all ages. You are not alone, other people are feeling a similar way – even those who love the winter, and Christmas (you know the ones that have the tree up before Bonfire Night!).

So, why is this? Why do lots of us get the “winter blues”? There might be different reasons for each person, but some of the common ones include:

- Less sunlight – it's dark by 4:30pm!
- The Christmas season begins (it's earlier every year!), which can be difficult for lots of different reasons
- Changes in routine – for example, kids having a break from school, shops may have shorter opening hours (more likely if you are rural), and often, more socialising happens during the Christmas season. If you are a parent, you might also have endless nativity plays and Christmas parties to attend!
- Bitterly cold weather (and rain!)

We have put together some tips that you may find helpful in beating the winter blues. We are all different, so what works for one person may not work for you, and that's okay!

1. Get into a sleep routine: With the dark approaching sooner in winter, our sleep cycle can be disrupted. Having more exposure to natural light can

help support our internal body clock get into a stable rhythm. This allows us to feel well rested which can help overall wellbeing.

2. Notice the good changes: It can be easy to dread going into winter – and Christmas – if you know that you don't enjoy it. Sometimes, thinking about it can make it feel worse than it is. Try to focus on the good things that winter will bring. For some people this might involve spending more time with family, or having more time on their hands to get stuck into a new hobby.
3. Less time on social media: Going through social media, you can tend to compare yourself to others and what they are doing, whether it's an exciting holiday, chilling on the beach at 1pm on Tuesday, or even something like starting a new job. This can often make us feel we are not achieving much or that we are stuck in a bit of a rut. So, try to get off social media a bit more during winter.
4. Create a new habit: If your life feels a little less interesting and exciting after summer, it might be a great time to think about developing a new habit. It doesn't have to be a big change. Maybe you have been promising yourself to read before bed instead of watching TV? Maybe you want to go for a walk for 30 minutes each day?
5. Embrace nature as often as you can: If you are able to, wrap up warm and get outside as often as you can, whether it be a quick stroll round the block, a dog walk, or having a cup of tea outside.

6. But most importantly seek support: If you are struggling with winter or Christmas, be sure to reach out for support, whether it be from a GP, friend, or professional mental health service. How you are feeling is very normal and there are things that can help.

Kooth and Qwell (delivered by Kooth) are digital mental health services provided by the NHS across the whole of County Durham and Tees Valley and other areas of the North East. Whether you are a young person or an adult you can access free, safe, confidential, and anonymous support through Kooth or Qwell. Through self help resources, speaking with others on the community platform, or speaking to our qualified counsellors, we are here to support you and your mental health.

With no personal details required, registration is really simple by visiting the following websites:

- For children and young people aged 11 to 18 years – [www.kooth.com](http://www.kooth.com)
- For all adults aged 18+ years – [www.qwell.io](http://www.qwell.io)

Both services are available immediately once registered and can be accessed from a mobile phone, tablet or laptop/PC, 365 days a year, 24 hours a day.

## The Communities team and other North Star staff regularly support the Prince's Trust Team Programme.

The 12 week personal development programme gives young people aged 16-25 the chance to gain new skills, gain a qualification, plan their own community project and develop their interview skills and CV.

We support different stages of the course, this includes being part of a panel for a Dragons Den style presentation and as an interviewer for students completing mock interview sessions.

Students on the programme have to research and plan the project and deliver a pitch for funding to North Star, showing how much the project will cost, how it will support the local community, the positive difference it will make and how as a team they will complete the work.

This year students have already completed some fantastic projects in Darlington and Stockton, including revamping gardens and outside spaces at a local care home and young persons service, creating murals for veterans to commemorate remembrance day and painting and decorating premises at a new charity that aims to develop woodwork skills and opportunities for ex-servicemen and women.

**Prince's Trust Team offer a number of team programmes across the North East, locations include Stockton, Middlesbrough, Redcar, Bishop Auckland, Catterick and Durham, if you would like to find out details of your local programme give the Prince's Trust a call on 0800 842 842.**

## NEWS

### North East Housing Consortium

## TACKLES LACK OF BOARD DIVERSITY

Change starts at the top – Local Housing Associations are tackling a lack of diversity in the Boardroom.

North Star, working in partnership with Beyond Housing, Gentoo, Thirteen Group and the Housing Diversity Network has launched a two-year programme to develop the Board members of the future.

The programme, the first to be delivered in the North East, has focused on increasing diversity at Board level. Applications were encouraged from people from ethnic-minority communities, the LGBTQ+ community, people with a disability, women, and young people, all of whom are significantly under-represented at Board level, locally, nationally, and internationally.

During the two-year programme, the twelve apprentices will receive

“I am honoured to be part of this wonderful opportunity. It is vital that range of diverse voices are heard in the boardroom. This is why I applied. I applaud all the partners for leading the way on EDI at a strategic level. This has been missing for too long.”

**Manisha Sharman**  
Board Diversity  
Programme Trainee

comprehensive training, shadow local Boards, and be supported by a mentor. The skills they will gain will help prepare them to become the Board Members of the future.

Angela Lockwood, Chief Executive of North Star was one of the founding partners. Her involvement was born out of a strong desire to bring about real change.

Through her connections with the Housing Diversity Network and the CEOs at Gentoo, Thirteen; and Beyond Housing; Nigel Wilson Ian Wardle and Rosemary Du Rose, respectively, the partnership was created.

Angela said “This programme will ensure that North Star is even more dynamic, energetic and understanding of the needs of people and communities. This can only lead to a stronger and more visionary organisation in every way”





The festive season is in full swing and homes across the UK are twinkling with fairy lights and Christmas cheer.

# HO HO HO!

But are you taking dangerous risks with your safety during the holidays? We've highlighted some common activities that may be putting you and your family in danger, with some simple tips to help you stay safe from [www.electricalsafetyfirst.org.uk](http://www.electricalsafetyfirst.org.uk).

## Christmas Trees

A "real" Christmas tree is a popular choice when it comes to turning your home into a winter wonderland. But, did you know that a real tree can catch fire a lot quicker than a fire retardant artificial one, so consider buying one of the fabulous fakes that are available – the only time Electrical Safety First will advise you to buy a "fake"!

If you do have a real Christmas tree:

- Make sure that you keep it well watered. Real trees can absorb up to a litre of water a day and it's important that you don't let it dry out.
- Don't spray hairspray on the pine needles to stop them dropping off – it's VERY flammable!
- Keep it well away from heat sources, particularly portable heaters.
- Make sure your lights are safe. If you are one of the 85% of Brits planning to decorate your tree with colourful lights, follow our advice.

## Prepare to Party

Half of UK women have panicked that they have gone out and forgotten to turn their hair straighteners off. Follow our advice – switch them off and put them away!

## Deck the Halls

Christmas lights brighten up homes across the UK but can be an electrical safety risk. One in twelve people confess to leaving their Christmas lights on overnight, potentially endangering their households as lights can overheat and create a fire hazard. Give the lights a break – switch them off when you're not there to enjoy them.

Don't overload sockets and try to avoid the use of extension leads or adaptors – it's easy to trip if you're a bit too merry!

## Driving Home for Christmas

Packing up and preparing a Christmas playlist for the car or train? Make sure you don't leave your laptop or mobile device charging on the bed while you get ready to leave. Always use a hard surface and don't overcharge your devices. And avoid charging your phone overnight or using cheap, unbranded chargers. Overcharging can cause some adaptor to become a fire risk.

## Cook up a festive feast!

Nearly half of us have admitted to leaving cooking unattended – and with a house full of family and friends celebrating Christmas it's easy to get distracted. So, watch what you heat and don't cook when you've had a few glasses of festive cheer!

## New Year's Resolutions

If you're planning to give up smoking, e-cigarettes can help you along the way. But make sure you use the correct charger. If you use a cheap, unbranded one it may be a resolution you regret.

Find out more

[www.electricalsafetyfirst.org.uk/guidance/advice-for-you/christmas-tips/](http://www.electricalsafetyfirst.org.uk/guidance/advice-for-you/christmas-tips/)

## Parcels in Communal Areas

With the festive season approaching there is always an increase in deliveries made to homes. Please be mindful about parcels left in community areas. They can become tripping hazards and also can get damaged. Please do ensure you collect them as soon as possible.

## DEVELOPMENT

November saw the completion of the final 4 bungalows at Yarm Rd in Middleton St George, Darlington.

The scheme of 20 bungalows for Affordable Rent (rent set at up to 80% of the market rate) has proved incredibly popular with applicants who needed to either presently be living in the village or have a strong connection to it.

The bungalows are of a high quality, with underfloor heating and good insulation, generous space standards, gardens and driveway parking.

These bungalows are part of the 50+ new homes that North Star are delivering this year across the region.



## What is condensation?

Condensation is the most common cause of dampness experienced in our customers' homes, especially during colder months. Condensation is caused by moisture in the air settling on a colder surface, such as a window or wall, or in areas of the home with little air circulation, such as behind furniture.



## Four steps to preventing condensation in your home

### 1. Produce less moisture

- Dry clothes outdoors where possible. If you need to dry your clothes indoors, use a clothes airer in the bathroom with the door closed and either a window open or extractor fan on.
- Avoid drying your washing on a radiator.
- Ensure your tumble drier is vented to the outside (never into the home).
- Always cover pans when cooking and do not leave the kettle boiling.

### 2. Remove excess moisture

Wipe down windows, windowsills, walls and shower walls every morning to remove condensation. Just opening a window isn't enough.

### 3. Ventilate to remove moisture

- Always ventilate or open a window when using the kitchen or bathroom, and close the doors to allow steam to escape.
- Open your bedroom windows for up to one hour every morning and throw back the sheets or duvets to air the bed and bedding.
- Leave space between the back of furniture and cold walls to allow air to flow.
- Don't block air vents in your home.

### 4. Regulate your heating

- In cold weather, the best way to keep rooms warm and avoid condensation is to keep low background heat on all day, rather than short bursts of high heat. This is cheaper than you might think!
- If you don't have heating in every room, open doors in these rooms to allow air circulation.
- Avoid using portable gas heaters.

**Please do contact us if you have followed these steps and are still struggling with condensation with your property – you can contact us on 03000 110 011.**



# Evenwood Community Hub

It's been a busy year at our Community Hub in Evenwood. Local community members, North Star staff and partners from County Durham have been busy working on improvements to the building, running holiday programmes for children and helping to support a new group: Evenwood Community Action.

Following consultation with residents in Evenwood it was agreed the Hub would change its name from Wellgarth Community House to Evenwood Community Hub. They hope the name change shows the Hub is open to all residents in Evenwood and encourage new members to join the activities.

Evenwood Community Action are going from strength to strength. They secured funding for a family fun day Halloween event and are now planning a Christmas Fair. The group members have shown great commitment and passion and are looking forward to the new year when they hope to run some regular coffee mornings and community activities at the Hub.

We know there is real strength in partnership working and this year we have built some strong community connections that will help continue the fantastic work at the Hub and help improve services for local people.

A huge thank you to a number of our partners including Dunningham Decorators for providing a team of painters to decorate the interior of the building, Teesdale Action Partnership – Councillors Neighbourhood Fund for a grant to purchase new equipment and furniture for the Hub and finally to YMCA Teesdale for providing holiday activities for children. What a difference your support has made!!

We are currently planning a timetable of activities, training and events for the new year, if you have any ideas or would like more details about the Hub please contact communities@northstarhg.co.uk or contact Coral Smith – Community Connector – 01642 796265.



## Respect Standards

Respectful Empathy Safety Polite  
Excellence Compassionate Trust

**North Star is committed to providing great customer experiences and we strive to make sure every contact with us is the best it can be.**

We want all customers and staff of North Star to feel safe and respected in their home and at work. We have range of policies and ways of working which set out to achieve this.

We enjoy great relationships and contact with the majority of our customers. However, recent research and experience has shown staff in customer facing jobs are facing rising hostility and abuse since the Covid lockdowns. This behaviour can severely impact the mental health and wellbeing of staff as well presenting risk to their physical safety.

Our staff are expected to treat all customers with respect. In return we expect our staff and contractors to work in environments which are free from unacceptable behaviour that includes:

- Hostility, aggression and verbal abuse.
- Threats of physical harm or violence.
- Inappropriate religious, cultural or racial insults.
- Homophobic, sexist or other derogatory remarks.

We support the Institute of Customer Service 'Service with Respect' campaign and have developed our RESPECT standards to set out our expectations for great contact with our customers.

### We will RESPECT you by:

- Listening to your needs.
- Taking responsibility for handling your enquiry.

- Communicating clearly and avoiding talking in jargon.
- Being genuine, polite and professional.
- Providing support and advice.
- Working with you to find solutions to problems.
- Acknowledging and apologising when we get it wrong.
- Putting things right as quickly as we can.
- Not mistaking an unhappy customer with a rude customer.

### You can RESPECT us by:

- Listening to us.
- Treating staff and contractors with courtesy and respect.
- Avoiding inappropriate language.

(Such as aggressive, inflammatory statements, derogatory remarks, unsubstantiated allegations, verbal abuse, shouting and swearing).

- Not using threatening behaviour. (Such as hostility, aggression, threats, harassment, victimisation or physical violence).
- Giving us time to deal with your query as fully as possible. We may not always be able to meet your expectations.

### How we will respond to customers who choose not to RESPECT staff:

- Set out to the customer that the conversation will not continue unless the behaviour can be improved.
- We will allow the customer the opportunity to modify the behaviour, taking into account their needs.

## NEWS



- If the behaviour improves we will continue with the conversation.
- If this isn't possible the customer will be reminded of the warning to modify their behaviour and the conversation may now be ended.
- If we end the conversation we will record an anti-social behaviour incident on our system which is in breach of the Tenancy Agreement.
- The customer will be sent a letter outlining our concerns.
- Customers who repeatedly communicate in an unreasonable way may be asked to communicate with the organisation in a different way i.e. email. In line with North Star's 'Unreasonable customer behaviour and persistent complaints policy'.
- Extreme repeat cases of threatening behaviour may result in you losing your tenancy.



# Tenants Annual Report Data 2019/20

## You said

North Star takes too long to complete repairs.

Our contractors have taken on additional repair operatives and administration staff to ensure they have the capacity to deliver a high quality service.

## We did

We meet weekly with our contractors to monitor progress on all overdue jobs and ensure they are resolved at the earliest opportunity.



North Star completed 13,560 repairs in 2020/21 which is a 4% reduction from previous year. The pandemic has had a significant impact on the delivery of our responsive repairs service during 2020/21, with key challenges including the:

- + Postponement of all routine repairs during the first lockdown in April, May, and part of June 2020.
- + Disruption to the repairs service caused by the phasing of contractor's operatives and administrative staff returning from furlough or having to self-isolate at short notice.
- + Difficulty in sourcing materials such as plaster, glazing and external doors in the first half of the year.

However, despite the lockdown we only completed 580 fewer repairs with a third of the years repairs being completed in the last few months of the year.

## Average number of repairs per property

3.1

## Average cost of a responsive repair

9120

## Our Homes

3787

Homes that we own and/or manage

599

Supported Housing

68

Managed for others

15

Shared equity / Leaseholders

3105

General Needs

## Your Home



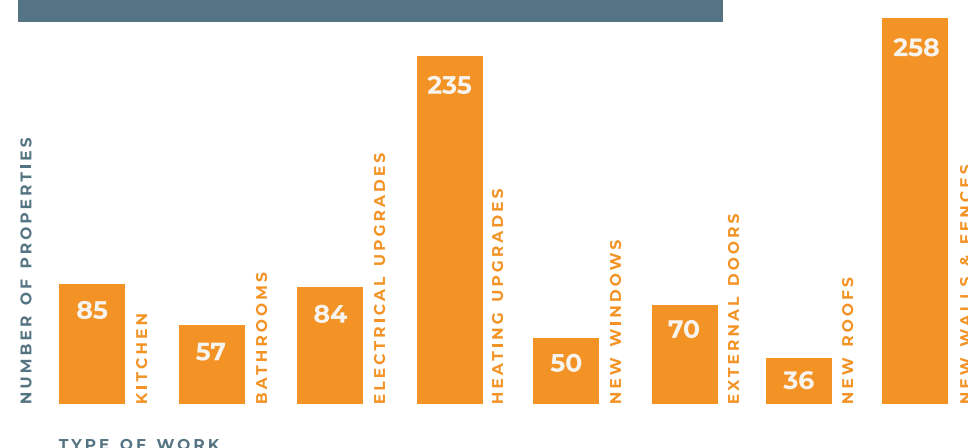
£2.38m

Spent on improving over 700 homes.

## Planned Maintenance

During the year we invested £2.38m improving 700 homes with planned investment works with a focus on kitchens, bathrooms, heating upgrades as well as a large external works programme.

## INVESTMENT WORKS 2020/21



	Target 2020/21	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
Percentage satisfied with Planned investment work	95%	95%	94.4%	96%

## Your tenancy

## Number of homes let in 2020/21

334

North Star continued to seize the opportunities of the last year, introducing new technology to enhance the customer experience. We created 'virtual viewings' giving customers remote access to our homes to keep people moving throughout the pandemic. 138 customers signed up to their new tenancies digitally using DocuSign.

	Target 2020/21	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	How we compare to others
% rent lost through homes being empty	1.2%	1.2%	0.85%	1.02%	
Average number of days taken to let a home	25 days	24	20	25	
Current tenants arrears	2.75%	1.94%	2.29%	2.5%	Average

During the year, our Welfare Benefits Officers have increased income for our tenants by £715k through reviewing benefits entitlements, helping 447 customers with the service.

Creating homes, building futures



Your neighbourhoods

- + 45 reports of ASB (45 in 2019/20)
- + We continue to work in partnership with police, local authorities, victim support and other agencies to tackle ASB.
- + Tenant satisfaction with how we managed ASB
  - + 2020/21: 100%
  - + 2019/20: 95%,
  - + 2018/19: 100%

Improving our services

The Housing Ombudsman published a new Complaint Handling Code in July 2020, setting out good practice that will allow landlords to respond to complaints effectively and fairly.

North Star took this opportunity to review its Complaints procedure to improve the service to customers. We have now:

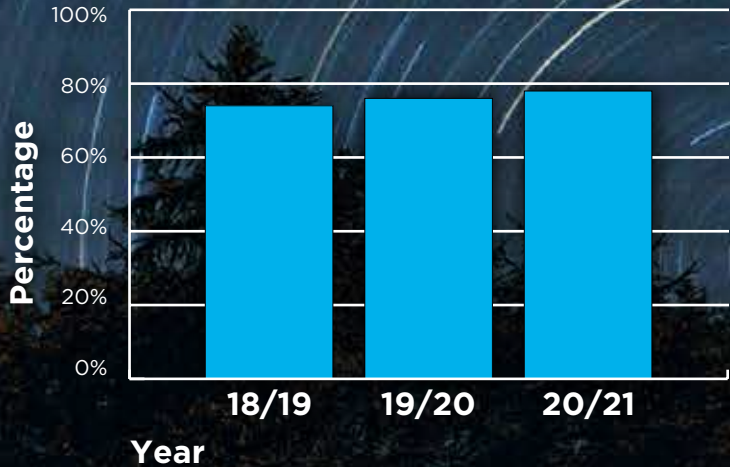
- + Simplified our complaints processes down to two stages of complaints.
- + Provided complaints and customer excellence training to all relevant staff.
- + Increased how frequently we update customers who have an active complaint.

In 2020/21 we received 95 complaints, which was one more than the 94 received the previous year.

Complaints	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
Asset Management	5	11	7
Compliance	0	17	13
Customer Services	2	0	2
Development	2	2	2
Finance	0	1	0
Housing	10	9	2
Maintenance	88	53	67
Supported Housing	4	1	2
Total	111	94	95

“90% of customers said they were satisfied or very satisfied with the overall services provided by North Star”

- + Communicated these changes, and now publish our performance and learning from complaints to customers every quarter.



You said

Experience for customers when calling North Star could be improved (waiting time and music specifically).

We did

Additional resource has been brought into the Customer Services Team to assist call volume.

Steps being taken to provide new call waiting music by December 2021.

Number of complaints resolved at stage 1 = 95 (98%) Stage 2 = 2 (2%)  
Percentage of complaints responded to within 10 working days = 98.8%

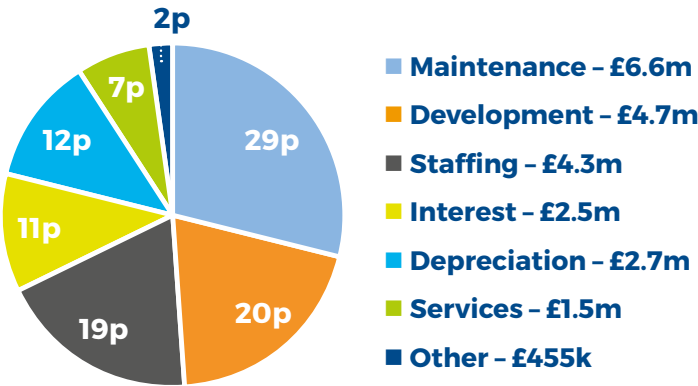
Reason for complaint	Total in number	%
Length of time to complete repair	32	34%
Communication issues	22	23%
Attitude of staff	11	12%
Damage caused	11	12%
Quality of repair	5	5%
Service Standards	5	5%
Standard of accommodation	5	5%
Processes	3	3%
Missed repair appointment	1	1%
Total	95	100%

North Star values customer feedback and all complaints received, either formally or informally are acted on to improve our services.

New Homes

This year, we funded the delivery of 72 new homes across Durham and the Tees Valley. Britain's housing crisis has continued to deepen this year. We are committed to providing part of the solution, by delivering high quality, energy efficient, affordable homes to those that need it.

What we spend each pound on



You said

Repair contractor's performance should be better/smaller local contractors should be used

We did

Alternative contractors used where performance of current contractor falls below standard e.g. onboarding of alternative roofing contractor in October 2021

Compliments

We received 105 compliments during the year:

- + 55 were in relation to repairs satisfaction
- + 20 were for housing and supported housing
- + 9 were in relation to our customer services team
- + 9 were for North Star's work in our communities.

You said

Tenants asked us if we could make how much we spend each year clearer in the 'What We Spend Each £ On' section of the Tenants' Annual Report by including total amounts.

We did

We have added this information to the key above this year.



# HOW NORTH STAR TENANTS HAVE BEEN INVOLVED IN 2021

by Jenny Brereton

## I started working with North Star in December 2020 and what an amazing year I've had.

Each time I had a piece of work that I needed our tenants opinion on I emailed our involved tenant group, I asked them to put themselves forward to help improve services for all tenants, and I was never disappointed. Each request was met with plenty of tenants willing to help.

In just 12 months the involved tenants have:

- Carried out 6 online consultations including:
  - + Covid Consultation
  - + First Customer Commitment
  - + Access to Housing Policy
  - + Repairs Review
  - + Neighbourhood Management Policy
  - + Low Carbon consultation – Resulting in 6 lucky winners of High Street Vouchers
- Spoken to The Institute of Customer Services directly.
- Viewed, and gave feedback on, North Star's Tenancy Agreement Video which was prepared by the Digital Engagement Squad.
- Attended 2 Digital workshops to help us to understand our tenants' digital needs and 2 complaints workshops to simplify the complaints process for tenants.
- Considered 13 funding applications and awarded £13.5K to community groups to provide much needed activities in their areas.
- Had 4 opportunities to view and comment on North Stars performance to identify where improvements can be made.

- Carried out 2 policy reviews – Access to Housing and Neighbourhood Management Policy.
- Starred in a staff training video.
- Starred in a promotional video for social media.
- Prepared a video about their involvement for the UK Housing Awards.
- Taken part in Scrutiny refresher training, Safeguarding training, attended the Housing White Paper information session and met with the Housing regulator.
- Helped us to review the role of the Housing Officer and the role of the Welfare Benefits officer.

A new piece of work carried out for the first time this year was to check that North Star is compliant with the Consumer Standards. Involved tenants carried out website checks, document checks and mystery shopping and, even though it was confirmed that North Star is compliant with the Consumer Standards, they identified over 20 recommendations to help improve services for our tenants.

Members of North Star's only set group, the Tenants Voice Scrutiny Panel (TVSP), have given over 400 hours of their time to help ensure that North Star meets the first of it's three Customer Commitments 'We will build open and honest relationships that respect your individuality and make sure you have access to information that matters to you.' which they started by preparing a questionnaire to go out to our wider tenant base. They received over 200 responses and used them to identify a subject to

scrutinise 'North Star's Approach to Customer Access to Information'. After many Zoom meetings, hours of research, discussions with staff members, Board members and a lot of hard work, they have recently completed their report which will be presented at the next Board meeting and includes 7 recommendations for improvement.

Carol, Chair of the TVSP, said 'I was very apprehensive in the beginning as it was a total new learning curve and experience for all of us. Once we got started taking our time to get used to Zoom meetings we got on with the job in hand the way we normally did it. Using zoom meant we spoke to some board members and senior staff letting them know how we were doing and getting their points of view.

I would prefer to go into the office to meet but, if using zoom for now is the way forward, I'm happy to continue in this way.'

Overall in 2021, despite difficult circumstances, adapting to Zoom meetings and online consultation, tenants have committed over 600 hours of their valuable time to help to improve North Star Services, that's an amazing 50 hours each month. I would like to thank everyone who took part by joining zoom meetings, carrying out research, mystery shopping, checking documents, testing our website, starring in videos and responding to surveys. You've all helped to make improvements for everyone at North Star.

**If you would like to know more about how to take part contact me by email, [jennifer.brereton@northstarhg.co.uk](mailto:jennifer.brereton@northstarhg.co.uk), text or call 07813722476 or contact the North Star Customer Services Team on 03000 11 00 11.**

# RENT REVIEW

**North Star is a not for profit housing association. The rent we collect is used to pay for the services and amenities needed to maintain our housing, to deliver services to customers and build new homes. Every year North Star reviews its rents ahead of a new financial year starting in April.**

Rents are set in line with a Government formula. This guidance means the maximum any social landlord can increase their rents by is limited to the Consumer Price Index (CPI) in September plus an additional 1%. CPI is a figure used to measure inflation. The Government agreed an additional 1% on top of inflation to support landlords to develop more affordable homes.

The level of CPI in September 2021 was 3.1%, so a maximum rent increase North Star could apply from April 2022 is 4.1% in most cases.

In December 2021 North Star's Board will carefully consider whether or not to increase rents. The Board will take account of a range of factors in reaching a decision including:

- Affordability for our tenants
- Our ability to fund development of new homes
- Investing in existing homes and communities
- Prioritising making our homes more environmentally friendly
- Supporting our tenants and communities
- Fulfilling our health and safety commitment to tenants

Just because we're 'not for profit' doesn't mean we don't work hard to be efficient. We do not generate profit for shareholders, we generate financial surplus for purpose. This means any surplus income North Star generates is invested back into the organisation and is set out in our Surplus for Purpose statement. Surplus enables North Star to be ambitious and deliver against our vision for the future. We invest in new and existing housing, supporting communities and neighbourhoods to enable people to thrive and develop our people and partnerships to tackle challenging housing issues.

The decision reached by our Board will be communicated to all tenants in writing in early 2022.

Some customers also pay a service charge and this is subject to a separate review to ensure these offer value for money to our tenants. We will be writing to those tenants who pay a service charge separately about the changes for 2022/23.

## NEWS

### Support

We recognise that the current environment is challenging for many households, increasing household bills and changes to personal circumstances can lead to money concerns. Our Welfare Benefits Officers can support you and assist with:

- Checking you're claiming all the benefits you are entitled to and helping you apply for them;
- Helping you challenge any decisions to stop or change your benefits;
- Explaining any changes to the benefits system and how they may affect you;
- Applying for any discretionary funds or grants to help you with your rent;
- Referring you to other specialist agencies for help with debt and budgeting advice.

**You can make an appointment to meet our Welfare Benefit Officers using our online service 'My North Star' or by contacting Customer Services on 03000 11 00 11.**





# MONEY MATTERS

## WARM HOME DISCOUNT

The Warm Home Discount is a government scheme which will offer £140 off your electricity bills this winter, or a voucher for households with prepayment meters.

Households in receipt of the Guaranteed Element of Pension Credit receive the discount automatically if the recipient's name is on the bill. If it is not you may need to tell your supplier you qualify for Warm Home Discount.

If you are not in receipt of Pension Credit you must meet the criteria set by your electricity company. These criteria vary from company to company. However you will probably qualify if:

- You receive Income Support, Job Seekers Allowance, Working Tax Credit or Child Tax Credit and have a child who is under 5 or disabled
- You have an income below £16,000 and a member of your household is either under 5, disabled or over 62
- You receive Universal Credit or Employment and Support Allowance (ESA); and benefit includes either the support or work related component or have a child who is under 5 or disabled.

If you are in receipt of the guarantee element of pension credit then you

should automatically receive the discount and do not need to call.

A list of participating suppliers can be found on the government website at <https://www.gov.uk/the-warm-home-discount-scheme>

The energy companies have to find a minimum number of people to register and often close registration once this has been met so please call as soon as possible if you think you may be eligible.

The money isn't paid to you; it's a one-off discount on your electricity bill, usually paid between October and March.



## What Can I Do If My Energy Supplier Goes Bust?

More than two million households have seen their energy firm collapse because of soaring gas prices. What are your rights if this happens to you?

### What happens if my energy supplier collapses?

If your energy provider goes bust, you will still receive gas and electricity. Your account will be moved to a new supplier by energy regulator Ofgem. You can't choose the provider and may end up on a more expensive tariff.

### What do I need to do?

Citizens Advice recommends making a note or taking a photo of your meter reading and downloading any bills, while waiting for your new supplier.

There's no need to cancel direct debits before your new account is set up.

If you're in credit, the balance will be added to your account with your new supplier. However, this may take several weeks.

If you're in debt to a company which has stopped trading, you still have to pay the money you owe. You will be contacted by its administrators, or the supplier which takes over its business.

### Will I still be able to find a cheap deal?

Usually, consumers are encouraged to shop around when energy bills rise. But at the moment better offers simply aren't available and price comparison sites are offering fewer energy deals at the moment.

People already on fixed deals are advised to stay put.

Those coming to the end of fixed deals will be moved on to higher standard tariffs.

A tariff set at the price cap limit – the maximum price suppliers can charge customers on a standard deal – will be the most competitive.

Instead of searching for a cheaper deal, the Energy Saving Trust says simple changes to our homes and energy habits could help offset the current price rises.

## How to save money on your energy bill

£ savings on annual bill

**£30**  
LED Bulbs

**£35**  
Switch off standby

**£55**  
Thermostat down one degree

**£8**  
One less wash a week (either dishwasher or washing machine)

**£25**  
Draught-proof

**Total: £153**

Source: Energy Saving Trust

Creating homes, building futures

**GREEN DOCTORS FREE INDEPENDENT ENERGY ADVICE SERVICE**  
we'll help you save money, energy and stay warm & well

[www.thegreendoctors.org](http://www.thegreendoctors.org)

FOR MORE INFORMATION OR TO ARRANGE A FREE HOME VISIT CONTACT:  
Freephone 0800 168 3547  
OR 0113 238 0601  
Email: [greendoctorleeds@groundwork.org.uk](mailto:greendoctorleeds@groundwork.org.uk)  
Subject to eligibility

**GREEN DOCTORS CAN HELP YOU TAKE CONTROL OF YOUR FUEL BILLS**

Practical Solutions To Reduce Your Energy Costs

- > Advice on switching to find the best energy deal
- > Installing energy saving devices

We help with:

- Energy bills and fuel debt support
- Grants for boilers & insulation
- Heating systems & controls
- Reducing energy costs in the home
- Water bills & debt
- Damp/condensation/mould advice

We can install:

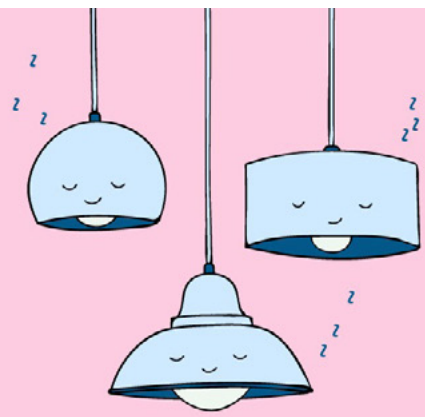
- Draught proofing
- Reflective radiator panels
- LED light bulbs
- Damp humidifiers
- Pipe lagging
- Water saving devices

[www.thegreendoctors.org](http://www.thegreendoctors.org)

FOR MORE INFORMATION OR TO ARRANGE A FREE HOME VISIT, CONTACT:  
**FREEPHONE 0800 168 3547**  
**OR 0113 238 0601**  
Email: [greendoctorleeds@groundwork.org.uk](mailto:greendoctorleeds@groundwork.org.uk)  
Subject to eligibility

Green Doctor is provided by Groundwork, the community charity 519846





# BIG ENERGY SAVING WEEK

22-28 JANUARY

energy  
saving  
trust

## Top ten energy saving tips

Take a look at our quick tips to reduce your energy bills



### Switch off standby

You can save around **£30 a year** just by remembering to turn your appliances off standby mode. Almost all electrical and electronic appliances can be turned off at the plug without upsetting their programming. You may want to think about getting a standby saver which allows you to turn all your appliances off standby in one go.



### Get a water efficient shower head

If you've got a shower that takes hot water straight from your boiler or hot water tank (rather than an electric shower), fit a water efficient shower head. This will reduce your hot water usage while retaining the sensation of a powerful shower.

A water efficient shower head could save a four person household (e.g. a family of four or even a shared student flat) as much as **£75 a year** on gas for water heating, as well as a further **£120 on water bills** if they have a water meter.



### Spend less time in the shower

Spending one minute less in the shower each day will save up to **£7 off your energy bills each year**, per person. With a water meter this could save a further **£12 off annual water and sewerage bills**. If everyone in a four person family did this it would lead to a total saving of £80 a year.



### Understand your bill

The information on a typical energy bill can be confusing. But it's important to understand which tariff you are on and if another tariff or supplier can offer you a better deal. Check online using the **Citizen's Advice price comparison tool**, and you could save **up to £300** by switching to a cheaper tariff or supplier.



### Switch to LEDs

You can now get LED spotlights that are bright enough to replace halogens, as well as regular energy saving bulbs ('compact fluorescent lamps' or CFLs). They come in a variety of shapes, sizes and fittings. If the average household replaced all of their bulbs with LEDs, it would cost about £100 and save about **£35 a year** on bills.



### Turn off lights

Turn your lights off when you're not using them. If you switch a light off for just a few seconds, you will save more energy than it takes for the light to start up again, regardless of the type of light. This will save you around **£14 on your annual energy bills**.



### Careful in your kitchen

You can save around **£37 a year** from your energy bill just by using your kitchen appliances more carefully:

- ✔ Use a bowl to wash up rather than a running tap and save **£25 a year** in energy bills.
- ✔ Only fill the kettle with the amount of water that you need and save around **£7 a year**.
- ✔ Cutback your washing machine use by just one cycle per week and save **£5 a year** on energy.



### Take control of your heating

More than half the money spent on fuel bills goes towards providing heating and hot water. Installing a room thermostat, a programmer and thermostatic radiator valves and using these controls efficiently could save you around **£75 a year**. If you already have a full set of controls, turning down your room thermostat by just one degree can save around **£80 a year**.

Whatever the age of your boiler the right controls will let you:

- ✔ Set your heating and hot water to come on and off when you need them
- ✔ Heat only the areas of your home that need heating
- ✔ Set the temperature for each area of your home



### Get savvy with smart controls

Smart heating controls are the latest innovation to help you control your heating and understand your energy use. They allow you to control your heating remotely via a mobile app, meaning that you can manage the temperature of your home from wherever you are, at whatever time of day.



### Draught proofing

Unless your home is very new, you will lose some heat through draughts around doors and windows, gaps around the floor, or through the chimney.

Professional draught-proofing of windows, doors and blocking cracks in floors and skirting boards can cost around £200, but can save around **£25 a year** on energy bills. DIY draught proofing can be much cheaper. Installing a chimney draught excluder could save around **£15 a year** as well.



# Our Services

## CALL BACK SERVICE

### NEED TO CALL?

Our customer service telephone lines are open Monday to Friday – 9.00am to 5.00pm apart from Thursday when we close at 4.00pm.

My North Star is available, 24 hours a day to report repairs, check tenancy details and pay rent at [www.mynorthstar.online](http://www.mynorthstar.online)

**NORTH STAR**  
Creating homes, building futures

Time Slot	Wait Time Category
9AM – 10AM	Red - longer call wait times
10AM – 11AM	Red - longer call wait times
11AM – 12PM	Green - shorter call wait times
12PM – 1PM	Amber - average call wait times
1PM – 2PM	Amber - average call wait times
2PM – 3PM	Green - shorter call wait times
3PM – 4PM	Green - shorter call wait times
4PM – 5PM	Green - shorter call wait times

Red - longer call wait times  
Amber - average call wait times  
Green - shorter call wait times

If you need to telephone North Star and don't have time to wait, did you know you can request a call back from us?

When you hear our 'thank-you for waiting' message, you will be offered the option to press 1 and leave a call back number.

You will be asked to key in the number using your telephone keypad.

If you make a mistake, don't worry, just press 1 and you will be able to enter the correct number.

You will receive a confirmation message and we will call you back within two hours.

If you don't receive a call back and still have an emergency please do try and call us again.

We value this feedback because without it, we would not be able to learn from when things have gone wrong and also when things go right.

## COMPLAINTS, COMMENTS & COMPLIMENTS PROCESS

### How to make a complaint

We want to make it as easy as possible to make a complaint about our services and they can be made in any of the following ways?

-  **In person**
-  **Through another person, perhaps an advocate, social worker, solicitor, etc.**
-  **In writing**
-  **Through comments made on surveys**
-  **By telephone**
-  **Through comments on social media such as Facebook, Twitter etc.**
-  **By email on services @northstarhg.co.uk**
-  **Via our website, [northstarhg.co.uk/your-home/your-tenancy/complaints-compliments-and-comments/](http://northstarhg.co.uk/your-home/your-tenancy/complaints-compliments-and-comments/)**

We will deal with anonymous complaints, comments and compliments in the same way.

We have a simple complaints process involving just two stages.

Once we have received your complaint, we will write to you within two working days providing you with details of who will be looking into the complaint and when you should receive a response by.


A stage one complaint will be dealt with by a manager who will endeavour to resolve the complaint within 10 working days.

If you are not happy with the outcome of stage one, it will go to the stage two process and will be dealt with by a senior manager or director who will endeavour to resolve the complaint in 10 working days.

If we are unable to resolve the complaint in these timescales, we will contact you in writing setting out what we are intending to do to resolve the complaint and by when.

When we are writing to you, we will provide information on how the complaint can be escalated if you remain dis-satisfied.

**If you are not satisfied with how North Star is handling your complaint, you can refer the complaint to the Housing Ombudsman, <https://www.housing-ombudsman.org.uk/>.**



**NORTH STAR**  
Creating homes, building futures

## MERRY CHRISTMAS!

From everyone at North Star

Our phone lines will be closed from  
4pm 23rd December 2021 until 9:00am Tuesday 3rd January 2022.

For any emergency repairs during the festive period,  
please call 03000 11 00 11





## North Star

North Star brings together the skills, resources and values of Endeavour, Teesdale and Darlington Housing Associations.

We are a strong organisation with a clear vision of what we want to achieve for the people who live in our region – creating homes, building futures.

## GET IN TOUCH

 [customer.services@northstarhg.co.uk](mailto:customer.services@northstarhg.co.uk)

 [www.northstarhg.co.uk](http://www.northstarhg.co.uk)

 [@northstarhg](https://twitter.com/northstarhg)

 [/NorthStarHG](https://www.facebook.com/NorthStarHG)

 03000 11 00 11

**Are you registered for my North Star if so contact us using the link:**

[www.mynorthstar.online](http://www.mynorthstar.online)

### Write:

Endeavour House, St Marks Court, Thornaby,  
Stockton-on-tees, TS17 6QN

14a Redwell Court, Harmire Enterprise Park, Harmire Road,  
Barnard Castle, County Durham, DL12 8BN

Please note that all calls to our Customer Services Team are monitored and recorded.

Please note our Teesdale office in Barnard Castle is by appointment only.

Creative

Connected

Courageous