



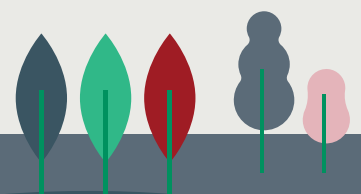
February 2021

Welcome

Hello and welcome to this edition of our Tenant Newsletter. It covers a lot of information and updates which I hope you find helpful. You do not need me to say just how challenging the year has been for everyone so far, and as a result our services have suffered some disruption. We have though, managed to keep this to an absolute minimum and throughout the COVID-19 crisis we have delivered essential services. We have been very mindful to ensure that the health and safety of everyone is managed effectively.

We have introduced and developed further our technology, enabling more efficient processes, such as online engagement with tenants, reporting repairs and paying rent through our website to name but a few. We have also been working very hard to connect with tenants at a personal level where needed through telephone calls and updates on advice and accessing support services through our tenant updates on the website (www.circlevha.ie). We have engaged with communities and our support service partners to ensure you can access services that you may need. This all fits with Circle's values. In the coming months we will keep you updated on the new housing we are building and buying, the initiatives we are involved in and the services we are providing. We welcome and value your feedback on every aspect of our work; it is how we continue to improve.

We'd like you to contribute to our Summer newsletter, to start we'd like you to think of a name for the newsletter, you can email your ideas to info@circlevha.ie. The winning entrant will be chosen by our Tenant Focus Group and will receive a **one4all voucher for €100**. Let us know about what you want from what will be your newsletter in time, including information and news and how you want to receive it. We look forward to your submissions and your thoughts.



TAG

Would you like to give your feedback and opinions on our services? To help improve services for all tenants? Want to be able to do this in the comfort of your own home? Then join Circle's Tenant Advisory Group, it's your way of keeping Circle in the know.

In our 2019 Tenant Experience Survey 89% of you said that you felt that a Tenant Advisory Group was a good idea, and 52% of you said you would like to get involved. In March 2020 Circle engaged the services of a development organisation 'Supporting Communities' to support us in developing a Tenant Engagement Structure and Strategy. We had hoped to deliver some training with our tenants and our teams face to face, however it became apparent that that was not going to be possible due to Covid 19. We adapted and held several online workshops with tenants and staff and established a steering group. This group meet twice a month on Zoom. The Tenant Steering Group have worked on our new Tenant Handbook, suggested ways to promote membership of the Tenant Advisory Group and are agreeing the structure and plan of how, together, we will establish this new Tenant Advisory Group.

We would love for you to be involved more, if you can commit to a monthly meeting online for the moment, please let us know. You can email us at info@circlevha.ie or let your Tenancy Services Officer know by calling Ph: 01-4072110.



Munster

Circle expanded our portfolio and experience and moved into Munster in 2018. We took on a number of properties through the Housing Agency and acquired an estate of 40 properties in Fairfield Park, Waterford city. To date we have housed families and individuals in Cork, Limerick, Waterford and Tipperary. We continue and plan further growth, through developments of new schemes and individual properties. This is done in partnership with the local authorities, State agencies, developers, and funders in providing good quality homes. Circle are embedded now in Munster and plan on working to expand into other regions in the coming year.

Customer Service Team

Your feedback from the Tenant Experience Survey led us to make a number of changes in how we delivered services in 2020. We re-structured our repairs and reception teams to create the Customer Service Team. Our goal in doing this is to make contacting Circle easier and so that your questions and queries are resolved efficiently. Our team is led by Shauna Rutledge, Customer Services Team Coordinator. Shauna and her team are working on implementing several new systems this year to improve your experience of communicating with Circle. We have adopted a Housing Management System so that we have better access to information and so that we can log and respond to your needs more swiftly. You'll have noticed that we added a number of tenant updates to our website and have been letting you know about these by text, we've also added new "Pay Rent" and "Log a Repair" functions to our website.

We have implemented a new menu on our telephone system to direct calls to a member of the team you want to speak to. If an officer is not available all voicemails are emailed directly to the Customer Care Team for logging and response. The team will also be implementing a new telephone system this year and a new Tenant Portal, increasing and improving the number of ways you can contact us. We'll be keeping you updated through the year on our progress.

New Tenant Services

Tenant Portal

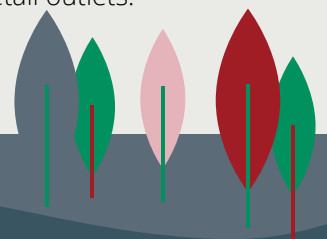
71% stated that they would use an online App to deal with a range of communication issues. We hope to introduce a tenant app before the end of the year, it will mean you can log a repair through an app on your phone, you'll be able to see your rent balance and pay rent, as well as viewing your handbook and other communications from Circle. We'll let you know when this goes live and show you how to use it on our website.

Website

We have made a number of website improvements including options to log repairs and upload photographs so that we can assess and respond to the repair more quickly. We added a rent payment function, and all our forms are now online so that you can complete a pet application, a housing application for new tenants, complete your pre-tenancy training online or complete your confidential income statement so that your rent can be reassessed.

Rent Payment Cards

We are rolling out new rent payment cards this year for all new tenants for those who wish to pay rent at the post office or PostPoint retail outlets.



Tenant Experience Survey

The results of our last Tenant Experience survey are in, and we've been working with colleagues to drive service improvements over the last 12 months.

Independent consultants, MCM Partners conducted this survey on Circle's behalf. It was decided to significantly redesign the survey, making it shorter, more reader friendly, and focus on tenant's experience rather than satisfaction.

We had a **response rate of 51%**. This was the highest rate since 2011, but also significantly this survey had the highest number of Circle tenants responding.

- The **ratio of female to male has increased** in this survey from previous surveys with just over 70% of respondents being female.
- Nationality and Ethnicity: **25 different nationalities** that took part in the survey.



89%
were happy with
the quality/condition
of their home.

In 2019 and 2020 we acquired a number of new turnkey schemes. The schemes delivered have been to an excellent standard. We have been tracking our key performance indicators in an effort to establish any failings in component performance and reliability and along with our stock condition survey will identify any re-occurring issues. This information will lead ultimately to better specifications in our new properties and enable us to plan for upgrades to existing homes reducing the level of maintenance calls in the future.

82%

were happy with
their neighbourhoods
as a place to live.



Many comments had to do with litter and landscaping. We are working to improve this through better management of our estates and where there are independent Owners Management Companies, we are liaising directly with the property agents to improve services.

"I live in lovely little apartment complex; all my neighbours are lovely and very friendly. It's in an area close to where I grew up and close to my son's school and very close to where I work. I'm very happy".



78%

would recommend Circle
to family or a friend.

We aim to continually improve our services. With that in mind we are launching a new customer record system to track rents, repairs, planned maintenance and communications history. All our employees have been taking part in training and testing this system to ensure we are fully utilising the new system and so that we can improve your experience when you make contact with us.

86%

were happy with
the services
provided by Circle.



2020 has been a busy year for Circle Housing. Due to Covid 19, we have had to change how we deliver services and it meant we haven't been able to do everything we wanted to do. We will be running customer satisfaction surveys on a regular basis. This will help us to know sooner if there are any issues with the service we provide, so we can act sooner to solve them. We continue and plan further growth, through developments of new schemes and individual properties. This is done in partnership with the local authorities, state agencies, developers, and funders in providing good quality homes. Circle increased our housing in Cork, Limerick, Tipperary, Meath, Wicklow, Waterford and Wexford in 2019 and 2020. We will continue to expand our housing in these areas and in other regions in the coming year.

64%



reported a maintenance issue in the last 12 months



77%

said they were very happy or happy with the service that they received.

To improve on the service we provide, we have empowered, trained, and supplied several operatives with the necessary materials and tools to carry out day to day repairs discovered by them on site. This will avoid the need for residents to report these items and the time waiting for our responsive contractors to deal with the matter.

We are at present planning our 2021 Stock Condition Survey. This will give us a greater clarity around the recurring issues and the urgency of attention required by those items. Having this information will allow us to plan within our budget to deliver replacement and upgrade programmes with focus on the items raised by you the tenant in our survey like windows and doors, kitchens and bathrooms and any other remedial works. These works will be delivered on a phased basis as part of our 2020 - 2023 Asset Management Plan.

There are certain issues that although minor, can if left, escalate into a major problem which will require attendance to your home by an expert. As part of our new Circle VHA Tenant handbook we have included a section of "handy hints for your home" which gives advice on how to combat at early stages a broad range of concerns raised by tenants which can be easily remedied by the tenant themselves following our step-by-step guide.

75%

were happy with estate management services.



Circle VHA are constantly monitoring and adapting to the challenges faced over a broad variety of schemes to provide the best possible service to our tenants. Where we provide Estate Management Services, we have increased the frequency of cleaning in communal areas to a weekly attendance and have allocated twice yearly visits to clean all windows. Many of our schemes have already seen the benefit of this initiative and we will continue with this across all schemes over the coming year. We have increased the regularity of visits to our schemes by our ground keeping contractors and now with the aid of our new Castleton Reporting system have the ability to monitor the performance of these contractors and accelerate the frequency of services if deemed necessary to particular areas. These service contractors will now also be boosted by our own in-house teams who will be carrying out green area maintenance on some of the smaller areas identified in their daily routines. We have put in place a maintenance contract to ensure that all gates we control are in good working order and regularly serviced. Should an issue with any gate be reported to us we will have this dealt with through our repairs service as soon as possible to maintain ease of access and security for all our tenants. We now have regular litter picks across all our schemes. We also engage the services of a contract waste disposal company to remove some of the larger items such as sofas and beds etc. should they be dumped on our schemes. We are issuing out new house rules to all tenants underlining their responsibilities regarding keeping pets. They will be reminded of the need to ensure they clean up after their pet should they foul in public areas. We are also installing new signage across our schemes to further remind people of their duty.

38%

experienced persistent anti-social or serious nuisance behaviour in 2019.



Instances of anti-social behaviour are unfortunately becoming all too common across a broad range of society. One of the goals of Circle VHA is that all our tenants should feel safe and secure in their home and the area where they live. Part of our approach to this is to install CCTV across our new and existing schemes. This has already commenced, and we will continue to add to this service over the coming year. We have developed and implemented a new Anti-Social Behaviour policy and have utilised the Residential Tenancies Board to enforce actions taken against tenants who have caused anti-social behaviour. Our Tenancy Services Officers have built strong links with community gardai, keys and fobs have been given to local gardai to access complexes and blocks while out on patrol. We have also established community clinics in some estates which are attended by the Gardaí and Local Authority ASB teams. Sometimes we are limited in the response we can take regarding ASB, some matters are criminal and require Gardaí involvement, it may also require tenants to give statements. Circle investigate every report of ASB however the actions we can take will depend on a number of factors:

- Whether the perpetrator is a Circle tenant.
- If a crime has been committed, we ask that you inform the Gardaí so that they can investigate and take action.

In order to issue a tenancy warning or even end a tenancy Circle require proof, all reports made are confidential and we may ask that you make a report to the Gardaí or give evidence at a Residential Tenancies Board hearing.

86% of tenants felt safe making a report of ASB to Circle and 71% believe we take these reports seriously. 79% feel safe in their community.

We asked what services you wanted from your Tenancy Services Officer: **73% of people wanted more information on their home.** We have, with the Tenants Steering Group completed a new Tenant Handbook, all tenants will receive their Handbook by post by March, and this will also be on our website. We are increasing the number of ways we communicate with you and we will be doing that more regularly through the Tenant App, newsletter, text and our website.

In 2020 we set up coffee mornings in some of our bigger schemes. Due to Covid we had to stop these however when it is safe to do so, we will bring the drop-in clinics and coffee mornings back.

Data Protection and CCTV Update

What is the status of using CCTV in your home?

The Data Protection Commissioner has informed everyone that a domestic CCTV system should only operate in a way that captures images of people within the perimeter of the CCTV operator's own property including the garden or driveway. Systems operated in this way are not subject to data protection law due to the personal or household exemption in that law.

What does compliance with data protection law mean?

Compliance with data protection law requires a number of things including: demonstrating that you have a lawful basis for operating the CCTV system, that you are transparent about how the system operates which entails the installation of appropriate signage, that you keep any personal data safe and only for a limited period, and that you comply with any access requests or requests for erasure from affected individuals who should be able to contact you from the contact details you include on the signage.

What happens if you fail to comply with data protection law?

Failure to comply may result in action against you by the Data Protection Commissioner and/or expose you to a claim for damages in the courts by any affected neighbours or members of the public, including passers-by. In other jurisdictions within the EU where the same data protection laws apply as in Ireland, homeowners have recently been subjected to fines and/or directions to cease operating the CCTV system where it cannot be operated in a way that only captures images within the perimeter of a home.

This means if you have installed a CCTV system and your CCTV system operates in a way that captures images (and sounds) of people outside of the perimeter of your property, for example in their homes or their gardens or on public footpaths or streets, you cannot avail of the household exemption and must comply in full with data protection law obligations.

Domestic Violence

The current government guidance has asked us to stay at home in order to mitigate the spread of Covid 19. However, we know that for some adults and children home is not a safe or comfortable place, and for some, the Covid 19 restrictions could increase the risk of experiencing abuse.

Domestic abuse can take a variety of forms including physical, sexual, emotional, psychological and financial abuse. It can occur within a family between one family member against another. It can involve a current or ex-partner, regardless of gender or sexuality. We know that if you are experiencing domestic abuse you can feel isolated and alone. It can be daunting contacting the Gardaí but if you are in danger, we want you to call 999. There are support services available too, please see some useful numbers below:



Women's Aid National Freephone Helpline

Ph: 1800 341 900

Men's Aid National Confidential Helpline

Ph: 01 554 3811



New Partners

WALK is an organisation that supports people with disabilities, their vision is to see a society where all people are included, valued and are treated as equal citizens. In 2019 WALK partnered with Circle VHA so that we could acquire and manage homes for people that use WALK services.

WALK and Circle signed a Memorandum of Understanding December 2019. Our own team met with WALK staff, management and visited some of their residents in their homes. In December 2019 WALK opened 11 new homes for older persons and people with a disability in Rafter's Lane, Drimnagh. The new properties became homes to over 15 people in December 2019, as part of the MOU Circle and now provide tenancy and property management services on behalf of Walkinstown Housing Association.

ALONE

ALONE is a national organisation that supports and empowers older people. They support individuals and their families, offer training to other organisations, and campaign nationwide for change for older people. ALONE's vision is that every older person has the support to age happily and securely at home. Circle and ALONE are working together to develop housing for older people in Inchicore, Dublin 8. This development will be the first Housing with Support scheme delivered in Ireland and provide 52 homes to older people. The development is due to begin in the summer and will take approximately 18 months to complete.

We are also working with ALONE to develop and pilot a new initiative that will trial the use of technology in older person homes. The technology includes a pack of equipment comprising of a small hub, a modem and sensors that help the user track temperatures, humidity and activity in the home. We hope that this will allow tenants to identify and track issues in their homes and will be especially useful for people living alone. It will support people to:

- Live at home independently
- Feel secure in their home
- Learn new skills
- Receive information and services, otherwise inaccessible to them

If you are interested in being part of this pilot initiative, please let us know by calling us on Ph: 01-4072110.



10 Easy tips to prevent mould growing in your home

As we head into spring, we're hoping the weather will take a turn for the better, however in cold weather, your home could become a breeding ground for mould and mildew. Mould can ruin your furniture and even compromise the structural integrity of your home.

But what exactly is it?

Mould you find in your home is an airborne spore that thrives in warm, damp conditions. It can form on virtually any surface, from textiles, to wooden furniture, tiles, painted concrete walls and plastics. During cold weather we tend to keep windows and doors closed to keep out the elements. In doing so, your home lacks proper ventilation, which causes the build-up of humid air. As days and weeks tick on, condensation gathers making for perfect damp conditions for mould to form. Luckily, there are plenty of precautions you can take to make sure your house is mould-free this winter.

1 Open Windows. While it's tempting to batten down the hatches until spring, try to ventilate your house as much as possible. Kitchens and bathrooms are at the highest risk of developing mould, so when cooking or having a shower, open a window or two for a short time to help the moisture flow out of the house instead of building up.



2 Keep Doors Shut. Since kitchens and bathrooms are the most common sites for mould, try to confine excess moisture to those rooms when in use. For instance, don't leave the bathroom door open while having a shower or bath. If you do, the steam will travel around the house more freely, potentially causing mould problems in other rooms. Over time, condensation can build up on walls in your hallway or landing, leading to mould growth.

3 Clean Carpets. If you notice a musty, unpleasant odour in carpeted rooms, it's important to take action. While invisible to the naked eye, mould could be spreading right under your feet.

4 Check for Leaks. While the use of household appliances such as kettles and showers can cause moisture build-up, it's worth checking your house thoroughly for any leaks or cracks that could be bringing excess moisture into the home. Common spots that should be checked include under sinks, behind toilets, around your washing machine and dishwasher and under radiators.

5 Clear the Clutter. We've all heard of doing a 'spring clean', throw away or recycle old bric-a-brac and clothes. The more belongings we have, particularly

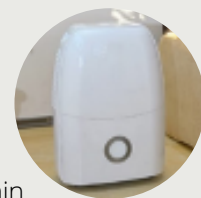
stuffed in cupboards and wardrobes, the less space air has to circulate – and air circulation is vital for controlling mould growth.

6 Don't Dry Clothes Indoors. It may be tempting to put your clothes on a clothes horse or radiator to dry them indoors, but without ventilation, the moisture will evaporate from the clothes and settle on the ceiling and walls, contributing to your mould problem. Consider investing in a tumble dryer instead, and if that's not possible, open plenty of windows when airing your clothes.

7 Clean Extractor Fans. Over time, extractor fans in your kitchen or bathroom can become clogged and lose power. Keep them running smoothly by cleaning them regularly. Extractor fans are essential for filtering humidity and bad odours outdoors.

8 Use a Dehumidifier. Dehumidifiers drastically reduce humidity levels, making your home less hospitable to mould, mildew and dust mites. The first time someone runs a dehumidifier in their home, they may be surprised to see just how much water it collects from the air. Some can gather up to 20 litres in just a few hours! This is typical of the first use, but if used regularly, moisture levels in the air will drop. They can be really beneficial for allergy sufferers, as they reduce dust build-up too. Dehumidifiers come in all shapes, sizes and prices. Talk to your local home appliance supplier for information on getting the best dehumidifier for your home.

9 So, what do you do if you find a patch of mould in your house? Don't panic. While there are numerous products out there for cleaning mould, many are loaded with harmful chemicals and allergens and should only be used as a last resort. Instead, try homemade solutions. Surprisingly, the natural acids in white wine vinegar have been proven to be effective in removing certain household moulds and are safe to use when cleaning. Pick up a bottle of the white stuff in any supermarket and put it into a spray bottle. Spray it on the surface where mould is growing and scrub with brushes or sponges. If you are worried about vinegar irritating your skin, wear rubber gloves. While vinegar fumes are not toxic, you might want to wear a mask to block the strong smell. Not only does it effectively remove mould but cleaning your house with vinegar regularly will stop it growing back.



10 If all else fails, bring in the big guns! Go to your local hardware store and ask about anti-mould products.

Get in Touch

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