



Tenant Handbook

This book gives you information about your tenancy with Choice Housing Ireland Ltd and the services we provide for you. Please keep this book somewhere safe.

If you need to find out something about your tenancy or about our housing services, please check here to find out what to do. You can look at the menu at the side of each page or go to the more detailed index on page 45. If you then want to talk to someone, please do not hesitate to contact us. See **How to contact us** on page 2.

The **Repairs Handbook** gives you information about our repairs service and tells you how to report a repair to us. Please keep these books together, along with your Tenancy Agreement, for easy reference. Staff will often refer to them when talking to you about your tenancy.

Please contact Choice Services Centre if you would like any part of this book explained or produced on tape, on CD, or in Braille **or large print**.

如果你希望我們對此書的任何部分作出解釋或翻製成錄音磁帶、CD、盲文或大字體版，請聯繫 Choice 服務中心。

Cantonese

Má mba mhaith leat míniú a fháil ar aon chuid den leabhar seo nó aon chuid den leabhar seo a fháil ar théip, ar Dhlúthdhiosca, nó i mBraille nó i gcló mór níl le déanamh ach teagmháil a dhéanamh le: Choice Services Centre.

Irish

如果您希望我们解释此书的任何部分或将它制成录音带、CD、盲文或大字体版，请联系 Choice 服务中心。

Mandarin

Get oantae Choice Services Centre gif ye hae speirins aboot onie pairt o' this beuk ir gif ye're leukin fer hit oan tape, oan CD, ir i braille ir baag prent.

Ulster Scots

This book was developed by staff and tenants working together.

choice



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the Choice
Services Centre**

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How to contact us

When you contact the Choice Services Centre by phone, e-mail or letter, your enquiry will be handled by one of our Customer Service Advisors. They will usually be able to deal with your enquiry immediately but if they can't they will ask a Housing Officer or other appropriate member of staff to contact you as soon as possible.

If you want to visit us, please always phone Choice Services Centre and arrange an appointment.

- **Phone the Choice Services Centre** 0300 111 2211
 - Our office hours are 9am - 5pm, Monday to Friday.
 - At weekends, on public holidays and after 5pm on weekdays, we will only deal with emergency repairs.
 - Your phone calls to us may be recorded for training or quality control purposes.
 - If you have a textphone, please dial 18001 before the telephone number you want to call.
- **E-mail us:** enquiries@choice-housing.org
- **Complete a form on our website** www.choice-housing.org
- **Write to us** Choice Housing, **Leslie Morrell House**, 37-41 May Street, Belfast, BT1 4DN
Choice Housing, **Maple House**, Beechill Business Park, 96 Beechill Road, Belfast, BT8 7QN
- **Website**
You can find general information about Choice Housing on our website at **www.choice-housing.org**.

You can find other useful phone numbers at the back of this book on page 44.

Your Housing Officer's name is
.....

Zero tolerance policy - our team will not stand for any form of abuse. Choice operates a zero tolerance policy in respect of abuse or threatening behavior towards our staff or contractors.

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About this book

Choice Customer Charter

We are committed to listening to our customers' views and work continually to improve our services.

We want you to be completely satisfied with the service you receive from Choice.

As a tenant, you are the focus of all we do, and we are committed to delivering the highest levels of customer service. So, whether you are applying for a new home, or you are an existing tenant, we want you to be satisfied with our customer services at all times.

The Customer Service Charter is supported by our ambitious standards which are regularly monitored and adhered to by staff.

We will:

- provide and maintain high quality affordable homes. All our new homes are built to the Lifetime Homes Standard;
- complete repairs within target timeframes. We have set targets for each of our repairs. You can follow our performance on our website: choice-housing.org;
- be polite and helpful. Our staff must adhere to our Code of Conduct which demands courtesy and professionalism from every employee;
- listen to and take on board our customers' ideas. We want to hear from you and we have a dedicated Tenant Involvement team to ensure we work closely with our tenants;
- ensure your rent provides value for money. Our rent and other charges are set with guidance from the Department for Communities, ensuring rents are affordable; and
- make our services accessible to all.

When visiting you, we will:

- always carry identification;
- request that our contractors carry identification, are polite, tidy, courteous and will inform you when they will call to complete the work;
- give you reasonable notice if we need to change or cancel an appointment; and
- leave a calling card if we find you are not in.

When you visit us:

- reception rooms will be clean, warm and tidy and have easy access; and
- up-to-date leaflets, posters and information will be easily available.

Telephone calls

- If we can't respond fully at the first point of contact, we will arrange for an appropriate Officer to contact you.
- When our offices are closed a recorded message will give you the office opening hours and tell you what action to take if you have an emergency.
- If the person you want to talk to is unable to take your call, we will tell you how soon they will get back to you.

Get in touch

If you feel that we are not meeting these standards, we would love to hear from you. You can email or call us at enquiries@choice-housing.org or 0300 111 2211.

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Complaints

We aim to provide a high-quality service but we realise that we may not always get things right or meet your expectations. Choice welcomes complaints, comments, compliments and suggestions on all aspects of our service and offer a variety of ways for you to give us feedback.

What is the complaint regarding?

You may not be happy with our service because we:

- did not carry out our legal responsibilities or follow our policies;
- did something we should not have done;
- did not provide a service that we should have provided, or did not do it to a good enough standard;
- did not take certain information into account when making a decision;
- took too long to respond to a request or enquiry; or
- treated you unfairly.

In general terms, a complaint is not:

- a disagreement with a government regulation which we must follow; or
- a routine request for a service such as reporting a repair to your home or a problem with a neighbour or anti-social behaviour in your area.

What you can expect us to do

We will see if we can do anything there and then to address your concerns. If we can't, we will register your complaint. We will acknowledge complaints within 24 hours.

We will look into your complaint and, if we find that we have done something wrong, we will apologise and do everything we can to put things right. We will also take action to make sure the same problem does not happen again to you or any other tenants.

Making a complaint

For information on how to make a complaint, comment or compliment, please visit the contact us section of the Choice website. We also have a leaflet which sets out the steps you should follow. Contact Choice Services Centre for more information.

Once our complaints procedures have been completed, you have the right to take your complaint to the Ombudsman. We will comply with any orders which are made by the Ombudsman.

You can contact them at Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (NIPSO), Freepost: NIPSO (No Stamp required), Progressive House, 33 Wellington Place, Belfast BT1 6HN, e-mail nipso@nipso.org.uk or phone 0800 34 34 24 (Freephone).

The Tenants Guarantee

This is a set of principles and minimum standards of service that all housing associations registered with the Department for Communities for Northern Ireland must follow. The Department makes regular visits to housing associations to make sure that they are keeping to the standards set out in the Guarantee.

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Complaints

Involving tenants

Involvement is good for residents, good for landlords and good for neighbourhoods. You can have your say about what happens to your home and neighbourhood, and we make sure we put your needs first. We have Community Champions who promote and develop tenant involvement.

Consulting you about our plans

Choice will consult you about:

- alterations we want to make to your Tenancy Agreement;
- changes to how we manage our service to you (for example, repair response times or your repair responsibilities); and
- modernisation or improvements we are planning to do to your home.

We will let you know about these matters and encourage you to discuss any concerns or suggestions you have with us. If the matter concerns you and your household, we will meet to discuss the matter with you. If the matter concerns the wider community, we will consult as many people as possible.

How tenants can get involved

Menu of involvement

Choice has a Menu of Involvement which provides tenants a variety of ways to work with us to improve our services, for your benefit and the benefit of others.

We recognise it is important to offer a range of involvement methods at a level that best suits your lifestyle. Our Menu of Involvement is available from our website.

We want to give you the opportunity to become involved as much or as little as you like.

Your voice in Choice

Choice has a Tenant Engagement Strategy, which aims to ensure we put tenants at the heart of service delivery.

As your landlord, it is important to us that you are happy with our services, so we can continue to improve.

Tenant Networks

Choice has 6 Area Networks and a Central Network.

Area Networks

Representatives from the Area Networks meet every 3 months and discuss issues that are local to them. If an issue isn't resolved, it can be referred to the Central Network to take forward and support.

The Central Network

The Central Network is made up of 12 representatives from the 6 Area Networks to ensure every area is represented. The Central Network meets every 3 months to discuss policies, monitor the Tenant Engagement Strategy, look at other performance areas and agree areas for the Central Network to work on with Choice.


The Central Network elects its own Chair and Vice Chair. The Chair sits on the Tenant & Client Services Committee, so that tenant representation within Choice is at Committee level.

Service Improvement Team

From time to time, focus groups undertake reviews of different aspects of our service, for example repairs and maintenance. The groups are made up of staff and tenant representatives.

To find out more contact The Tenant Involvement Team on 0300 111 2211.

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Why should I get involved?

Because it benefits Choice tenants. You can influence change, meet new people, gain new skills (we provide training) and make a difference to your neighbourhood. By working at various levels, you can have a say in how we work. This means that you can influence what changes and improvements we make for you and the people who live in our homes in the future.

How can I get involved?

It depends on what you would like to do and how much time you can contribute. It could be just a couple of hours a month or more. Contact the Tenant Engagement Officer to find out more. See **How tenants can get involved** on page 5.



What if I don't have time to get involved?

If you do not have spare time you can still be involved by filling in survey forms, or just phoning or e-mailing us to tell us what you think about our service. We will always make sure you know what is going on by sending out letters and leaflets, producing our tenant newsletter and keeping our website updated.

How can we be sure that you will take account of our views?

The Chair of the Central Network sits on the Tenant & Client Services Committee, and he/she will ensure tenants views are represented at committee level. You might consider putting yourself forward to be co-opted to your regional network. You can find out what is involved in this by talking to the Tenant Engagement Officer



What do the Community Champions do?

Community Champions are responsible for the delivery of our commitments detailed within the Tenant Engagement Strategy. This includes supporting the Central and Area Networks, as well as promoting further opportunities for tenants to get involved.

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Involving tenants

Rent and charges

You must pay your rent on time. This is very important if you want to stay in your home.

Rent and rates

Rent is the money we charge for providing your home and our services, including repairs and maintenance.

Rates are paid to Land and Property Services. We collect this from you with your rent on behalf of LPS.

Your Income Recovery Officer and your Housing Officer will contact you regarding any missed or late rent payments.

Service charges and support charges

Tenants (and leaseholders) pay service charges if they live in certain types of accommodation where there are shared facilities or services. The charges cover:

- certain repairs and maintenance of the communal parts and systems within the building;
- cleaning shared areas, including windows;
- providing lighting and heating in shared areas;
- maintaining and landscaping shared gardens; and
- insuring the building.

Service charges are based on actual costs of delivering the service. We review them annually and they may increase or decrease.

Support charges are for any additional services you receive:

- services of scheme coordinators and specialist staff; and
- emergency alarm systems and other facilities.


Heating and Electric charges

If you live in a scheme with a communal heating or electric system, you may be responsible for the heating and / or electric charges for your home. These charges will be set out in your Tenancy Agreement. Charges are updated annually in line with actual usage from the previous year.

How to pay

- **Direct Debit / Bank payment.** You can arrange to pay your rent via Direct Debit or bank payment/standing order. Contact Choice Services centre and a member of the Income recovery team will assist you.
- **Debit or credit card.** Contact a member of the Income Recovery Team. You will need to provide your card details and the amount to be paid.
- **Allpay.** Download the Allpay App. You will need your rent reference number (from your payment card), debit/credit card details and the amount to be paid.
- **Paypoint.** At any post office, shop or garage showing the Paypoint logo. You must provide them with your Allpay rent payment card. Ensure you keep your receipt as proof of payment.
- **Housing Benefit.** If you claim Housing Benefit it can be paid directly to Choice. However, if your Housing Benefit entitlement does not cover the full weekly charge, you are required to pay Choice the difference.
- **Universal Credit.** If you claim Universal Credit it can be paid directly to Choice. However, if your Universal Credit entitlement does not cover the full weekly charge you are required to pay Choice the difference.
- **Rates Rebate.** If you are in receipt of Universal Credit you will need to submit an application for Rates Rebate. If this is not received, or does not cover the full weekly rates charge, you are required to pay Choice the difference.

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 **Contact your Income Recovery officer on 0300 111 22 11 and select option 2**

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How much rent do I pay and how often?

The total weekly amount you must pay is detailed on your Tenancy Agreement and subsequent rent notification letters issued every March. The total weekly charge is made up of rent, rates, service charges, support and heating and electric charges.

You may be able to claim benefits which will help with your rent.

See **Benefits** on page 10.

You can choose to pay your rental charge at different intervals (weekly, fortnightly, 4 weekly, or monthly). However it is your responsibility as tenant to ensure that your rent account is paid on time and does not fall into arrears.

There are various ways you can pay. See **How to pay** on page 7.

Paying your rental charges by **Direct Debit** comes with a guarantee and you are protected by three important safeguards:

- an immediate money back guarantee from your bank in the event of an error in the payment of your Direct Debit;
- advance notice if the date or amount changes; and
- the right to cancel at any time.



How do I keep track of my rent payments?

We send you a statement twice a year, however, you can also request another statement at any time.

Will my rent increase?

Choice review the rent and other charges annually. If there are any changes to your rental charge these will usually take effect from April and we will write to you giving at least 28 days notice before implementing any changes. Our rents should be affordable to people on low incomes and will be cheaper than rents charged by most private landlords. However, we must make sure that rents cover our costs.

What if I pay my rent late or have financial difficulties?

If you pay your rent late or miss a payment, you are in breach of your Tenancy Agreement. Please be aware this may result in Choice taking action in line with your tenancy agreement. If you are experiencing financial difficulties our Financial inclusion team can be contacted (page 9) to provide advice and assistance.

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Rent and charges

Financial Inclusion

The Financial Inclusion Team are a specialist group of advisers who can support you on a range of issues, to ensure you are in the best position to maintain your tenancy.

Types of help provided:

- Housing Benefit/Universal Credit/Rates Rebate Scheme;
- benefit calculations to maximise your income;
- help with filling in benefit applications, including disability benefits;
- advice and help when affected by the bedroom tax or benefit cap;
- opening and using a bank or credit union account;
- accessing grants; and
- access to vouchers from local food banks.

Support is also available on all aspects of your finances. You don't need to be struggling with your rent to access the service. The team will endeavor to contact every new tenant to assist with setting up home and offer help or assistance with any benefit claims, should you need it. You can also get in touch with us at any point in your tenancy via our service centre.

Tenant testimonials

"I was homeless for two years with my two kids waiting to get a suitable property. I was allocated a house with Choice and before I moved in, their Financial Inclusion Team were in touch. We had nothing because the majority of our belongings in storage had to be dumped. From the very beginning, the Financial Inclusion Team let me know everything I was entitled to. There was a smooth transfer across to the new Universal Credit from my previous benefits. Thanks to Choice's support with benefits and even budgeting on a daily basis, I learnt about my rights and was able to avail of a £1000 discretionary payment, which enabled us to furnish our new home."

"Thank you for all your help in dealing with our housing benefit issue. You were a wee angel"

"I cannot tell you how much I appreciate the effort for my family"

"We had struggled for some time and did not understand the benefit system, thank you for helping"

Further to the services we offer, we have developed partnerships with other vital organisations throughout our communities, and can help with signposting on areas such as; personal debt, food poverty, localised charities/schemes, representation at benefit tribunals and access to vouchers from local food banks.

The Financial Inclusion service is free and impartial, providing support and solutions that meet your needs. Information you provide on your circumstances is strictly confidential. We understand you are likely to approach the team with sensitive information, which may be difficult to talk about. Whatever the issue, we will treat it with respect and work our hardest to find you a tailored, positive solution.

The team are ready and waiting to help. If you feel you need support, contact us as soon as possible:

- phone the Choice Service Centre today and ask for a member of the Financial Inclusion Team on 0300 111 2211;
- ask your housing or income recovery officer to refer your case to the team; or
- email us on Financialinclusion@choice-housing.org.

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Rent arrears

Rent arrears is the term we use for rent you have not paid us. If you do not pay your rent, you could lose your home. It is always better to pay off a small amount of what you owe with your weekly rent than pay nothing.

What to do

If you know you cannot pay your rent, or if your Housing Benefit or Universal Credit claim is delayed, please tell us straight away. Do not delay. We understand that anyone can have money problems from time to time and we will do our best to help you. We can arrange for a member of Choice Financial Inclusion team to contact you. However, you can also seek independent advice from Citizens Advice. See **Useful contacts** on page 44.

If you cannot pay the full amount you owe, we may make an arrangement for you to pay it off gradually. This means paying an extra amount with your weekly rent over a period of time until you have paid off all the rent you owe. If you have a low income and have not applied for Housing Benefit or Universal Credit Housing Costs, you should apply immediately.

Benefits

Housing benefit

You can apply for Housing Benefit through the Housing Executive. We can give you a form. Fill it in immediately, as you are responsible for paying the full rent until your benefit comes through.

Universal Credit

If you receive Universal Credit, you must log onto your Universal Credit account and report a change in your Housing Costs and advise Choice of the change. You must also submit an application for Rates Rebate. You are responsible for paying the full rent until your benefit comes through.

If you don't pay

We will take legal action against you if you do not keep to a repayment agreement and you continue to be in arrears for your rent or service charges. If you make no effort to pay off your arrears we will take action to end your tenancy.

Legal action to end your Tenancy

- We will serve you with a legal 'Notice' which gives the reasons we are taking action and a date at least four weeks ahead when we can start the process of going to court. The Notice will also tell you how to appeal against the action and how you can get advice.
- If we decide to go to court we will write to you. The court will also write to you giving a date when a judge will listen to your case. This is called a 'Hearing'.
- At the hearing, we will present our case and you will tell the judge about your situation. The judge will decide whether to grant us a 'Possession Order' to end your tenancy. As a result of the Order:
 - you will have to pay for our court costs and the cost of any enforcement order we have to make;
 - you may have to leave your home. If this happens you may be considered to be intentionally homeless, which means another housing association, the Housing Executive or other social landlord does not have to rehouse you; and
 - you still have to pay your arrears even if you leave.

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Rent arrears

Your Tenancy

You will have either an **Introductory** or **Secure Tenancy**. The two types of tenancy are very similar with only a few differences.

Introductory Tenancies

When you become a tenant of Choice you will be given an Introductory Tenancy if:

- you have never rented social housing before;
- you have only rented from a private landlord; or
- you have had a period away from being a tenant of Choice, another housing association or the Housing Executive.

The Introductory Tenancy will normally last for a year. You will usually be given a Secure Tenancy at the end of the year as long as you have not broken your Tenancy Agreement.

During your Introductory Tenancy, Choice can bring your tenancy to an end more easily. See **Breaking the conditions of your tenancy** on page 13.

With an Introductory Tenancy some of your rights are limited:

- you cannot exchange homes with another tenant;
- you cannot sub-let your home or take in lodgers;
- you cannot hand on (assign) your tenancy to someone else, except in certain circumstances. See page 19; and
- you cannot carry out changes to your home.

The aim of giving Introductory Tenancies to new tenants is to protect, as far as we can, the interests of Choice and our existing tenants.


Secure Tenancies

Most tenants who have had their tenancy for at least one year will have a Secure Tenancy. Also, if you had a tenancy with another housing association or the Housing Executive immediately before moving home, you will be given a Secure Tenancy at the start.

With a Secure Tenancy:

- you can stay in your home for as long as you want provided you do not breach the Tenancy Agreement. See **The Tenancy Agreement** on page 13;
- you cannot be made to leave your home except by a Court Order; and
- when you die, your tenancy can normally be taken over by a member of the family who has been living in the property with you before your death, providing they meet all the necessary criteria. See **Your rights** on page 15 and **Household changes** on page 19.

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What type of tenancy will I have?

You will have either an Introductory or a Secure Tenancy. See **Introductory Tenancies** and **Secure Tenancies** on page 11.



Can Choice change the terms of the Tenancy Agreement?

We can introduce new minor rules and regulations and change the level of rent or service charges without asking your views. However, we can only make major changes to the Tenancy Agreement if we have been through a full consultation process with our tenants. See **Involving tenants** on page 5.

Can I stay in my home for as long as I want?

As the tenant you will have full security of tenure. This means you have the right to stay in your home for as long as you want provided you do not breach the terms of your Tenancy Agreement. See **The Tenancy Agreement** on page 13.

If your family breaks up, joint tenants and married or civil partners have certain rights to stay. See **Family break-up** on page 21.

When you die, a partner or relatives living with you may have the right to take over the tenancy. See **Household changes** on page 19.



How is the amount of rent I pay decided?

Rents are fixed by Choice and are reviewed annually. See **Rent and charges** on page 7.

What are my rights?

You have both contractual and statutory rights. Your contractual rights are set out in your Tenancy Agreement. See **The Tenancy Agreement** on page 13.

Your statutory rights are laid down by the government. See **Your rights** on page 15.

Introductory tenants do not have full Secure Tenancy rights until the end of the first year (or any further extended period). See **Introductory Tenancies** on page 11.



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Your Tenancy

The Tenancy Agreement

Your Tenancy Agreement is the contract between you and us. If you do not keep to the conditions of your Tenancy Agreement, you will have broken the Agreement.

Responsibilities

Below is a summary of the details of your tenancy, as outlined in your Tenancy Agreement. There are more details about the conditions of your tenancy in your Tenancy Agreement.

Our main responsibilities are to:

- consult you in writing on any changes we plan to make to the Tenancy Agreement; and
- maintain your home. See your **Repairs Handbook** for details.

Your main responsibilities are to:

- pay the rent and other charges on time;
- use the property as your only or main home;
- take care of the property, keep the inside in a good condition, and do any repairs that are your responsibility. You must report any repairs that are not your responsibility to us immediately;
- provide access annually to allow our contractors to service any gas appliance in your home;
- make sure that everyone in your household or any visitors keep to the conditions of your tenancy; and
- let us know in writing four weeks before you plan to move and, when you go, leave the property in a good condition.

Your rights. You have the right to:

- appeal against decisions we make that you don't agree with;
- live in your home without unnecessary interruption by us or anyone working for us; and
- use your legal rights as a tenant. See **Your rights** on page 15.

Breaking the conditions of your tenancy

If you break the conditions of your Tenancy Agreement, Choice will take action to end your tenancy. We do not want this to happen and will work with you to help you remain in your home.

You will be breaking the terms of your Tenancy Agreement if you:

- do not pay your rent in full or on time;
- cause nuisance;
- harass neighbours or our staff, or behave in an anti-social way;
- do not provide access annually to allow Choice Contractor's to service any Gas appliance in your home
- damage the property; or
- make false statements to get a tenancy.


If we request that you put things right and you do not do so, we will take legal action and you may have to give up your home, if ordered to do so by the Court.

For a full description of the process of going to court for breach of tenancy, see **Ending your tenancy** on page 10.

Our rights. We have the right to:

- change your rent or other charges if we tell you 4 weeks before we do so; and
- access your home to carry out inspections or repairs, to service appliances, or to carry out safety inspections, provided we give you at least 24 hours warning (unless it is an emergency).

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What is the Tenancy Agreement?

This is the legal contract between you and us. By signing it, you agree to keep to the conditions written in the Agreement. See **Our rights** and **Your rights** and **Responsibilities** on page 13. You should take the time to read your Tenancy Agreement carefully.



What if I am a joint tenant?

Joint tenants are both responsible for the tenancy. This means you both have equal rights and equal responsibilities. Each tenant is responsible for paying the full rent and other charges. If either of you break the conditions of the Tenancy Agreement, both tenants can be held fully responsible. See **Breaking the conditions of your tenancy** on page 13.

What if Choice does not carry out its responsibilities?

Contact Choice Services Centre first and let them know what has happened. In most cases, problems are sorted out quickly after an informal discussion. If matters are not sorted out, you should follow our formal complaints procedure. See **Complaints** on page 4.



What if I fail to carry out my responsibilities?

You should try to sort out the matter with us first. If you do not correct the situation or we cannot come to an agreement about what you should do, we may have to take formal action against you. This may mean that we have to make you and your family leave your home. We only do this as a last resort. See **Can you make me leave my home?** below. If you have trouble paying your rent, we will try to work out a reasonable repayment arrangement with you. We can also help you apply for benefits. See **Rent arrears** on page 10.

Can you make me leave my home?

Yes, if you have broken the conditions of your Tenancy Agreement (for example, by not paying your rent or by causing nuisance to your neighbours). If we have to take action against you, we will always follow a clear process. See **Breaking the conditions of your tenancy** on page 13 and **Ending your tenancy** on page 10.



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Tenancy Agreement

Your rights

These are your legal rights as a tenant.

Access to and control of personal information

We must treat all personal information about you as confidential. However, by law, we must share with certain public organisations some of the details you give us or certain information given to us about you.

You can see this information relating to you, held by us on file or on computer, provided you give us reasonable notice. We may apply a charge for this.

If you are unhappy about any information or an expression of opinion that you have seen in your files, you can ask for it to be corrected, amended or taken out. If we disagree with your request, you can insist that we add a note about your views to the records.

Carrying out improvements to the home (except Introductory Tenancies)

You can carry out improvements to your home provided you have our permission in writing before you start work. We can only refuse to give permission for certain reasons.

If you leave your home, you may get compensation for certain types of improvements you have carried out. See **Improvements** on page 29.

Getting repairs done

You can expect to have certain emergency and urgent repairs carried out within a certain number of days. These are repairs which, if not completed on time, would seriously affect your health or safety.

We must make sure the work is completed within the set period.

If one of these repairs is not completed within this time, you can request compensation under the Right to Repair regulations.

If you want to find out more about the Right to Repair, contact us for a copy of our policy.

Sub-letting and taking in lodgers (except Introductory Tenancies)

You can take in lodgers provided you do not overcrowd your home. A lodger is someone who shares your home as a member of your household.

You can sub-let part of your home but only if you first get our written permission. You may not sub-let the whole of your property.

Before they move in, you must tell us the name, age and sex of any intended lodger or sub-tenant, the part of your home they will occupy, and the date they intend to move in. You must also tell us again if they move out. See **Household changes** on page 19.

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Exchanging tenancies (except Introductory Tenancies)

You can exchange (swap) homes with another Choice tenant with a Secure Tenancy or a tenant of another housing association or the Housing Executive. **You must inform both landlords and get our permission in writing before you move. We will give permission except where there are specific reasons such as overcrowding, under-occupation or anti-social behaviour.** See **Applying to move** on page 37.

Security of tenure

No tenant can be made to leave their home unless ordered by a court. Generally, before ending a Secure Tenancy a court has to be satisfied that there are specific grounds for making you leave, such as you breaching the Tenancy Agreement, or making false statements when you applied for the tenancy. See **Your Tenancy** on page 11, **Tenancy Agreement** on page 13 and **Family break-up** on page 21.

Consultation about changes that affect you or your home

We must consult you about any major changes we want to make to your Tenancy Agreement or to our housing management policies (such as repair response times or repair responsibilities) and give you 4 weeks notice of when any changes will come into effect. We must also consult you about any modernisation or improvement to your home.

We will tell you about any other plans that affect you or your home. We will also listen carefully to your views before making any final decisions. See **Involving tenants** on page 5.

Transfer of tenancy on death (or before)

When a tenant dies, the tenancy will automatically pass to any joint tenant, or it can be taken over by their partner by marriage (or civil partnership) if he or she is living in the home at the time of the death.

If there is no joint tenant or partner by marriage (or civil partnership), then any close member of your family, or a partner who has been living with you, may take over the tenancy, provided he or she has been living with you for at least 12 months.

By law, such a transfer of tenancy (succession) only happens once. So, if the tenant who dies took over the tenancy when one of their relatives died, it cannot pass on again. However, in certain circumstances Choice may give a new tenancy to someone who wants to remain in the home. See **Household changes** on page 19.

When a succession takes place, we may ask the successor to move to more suitable housing. They will still be given a Secure Tenancy in the new home.

You can hand on your tenancy before you die but only to someone who could have taken it over after your death. This is called an Assignment. You must contact us if you want to carry out an Assignment of your tenancy.

Information about our performance as your landlord

Once a year, we publish an Annual Report which contains certain information, letting you know how well we are managing our services.

Our Annual Report will be published on our website.

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Moving in

Remember, if you have any problems relating to your tenancy or settling in, please contact Choice Services Centre or, if you live in Sheltered Housing, talk to your Scheme Coordinator.

When you know you are moving

You will need to make the following arrangements.

- Apply **immediately** to the Housing Executive if you think you might be entitled to Housing Benefit **or** if you have been receiving Housing Benefit at a different address, you must tell them that you have moved.
- Make an application for Universal Credit. If you are already in receipt of Universal Credit, you must update the Landlord Portal with your housing costs and advise Choice of your date of application. You must also submit an application for Rates Rebate.
- Contact the electricity, gas and phone companies to ensure that these services are put into your name. You are liable for all costs from the start of your tenancy.
- Arrange contents insurance for your belongings.
- Arrange for your TV licence to be transferred.
- If you claim Income Support, Jobseeker's Allowance or any other benefit, you need to make sure the Social Security Agency knows your new address. Check on your papers to see who you need to contact.

For advice or to discuss any problems you are having with your home or with the tenancy, please contact us. We want you to settle in easily and be happy in your home.

Newly built or recently renovated homes

If you are the first tenant in a home that has just been built or renovated, you may find certain things need to be fixed. Do not worry if you find paintwork flaking or cracking inside. These are signs of the wall plaster drying out. It can take up to a year to settle but you can speed this up by making sure your home is well ventilated.

For other problems, please let us know as soon as you notice anything wrong. For the first year the work is under guarantee and we can get the original contractor to fix certain problems that relate to their work.

Decorating and repairs

Before you move in we check the condition of the property and carry out gas and electrical safety checks and any necessary repairs and redecorating.

Once you take on the tenancy you become responsible for all painting and decorating inside your home.


Certain repairs are your responsibility. Your **Repairs Handbook** can help you identify what these repairs are.

Home contents insurance

Choice does not insure tenants' furnishings or belongings. We strongly advise you to take out your own home contents insurance. This will cover you against damage to your personal belongings, floor coverings, furniture and other contents and decorations, including damage from fire, flood, break-in, vandalism or accidents.

When choosing an insurance policy, you should make sure that it will cover broken glass and locks in doors and windows, as these are repairs you will usually have to pay for. Your insurance should also cover certain items if they are stolen during a break-in.

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When does my tenancy start?

The date given on your Tenancy Agreement is when you become the legal tenant. From that date on, you are responsible for paying rent and other charges, even if you do not move in immediately.

See **Responsibilities** on page 13. (Remember, if you claim Housing Benefit or Universal Credit you will only receive it once you have moved in so if you do not move in immediately you will have to pay the full rent until you do.) You are responsible for the security of your new home from the date you receive the keys from us.



What about repairs and redecorating?

Before we let a property, we will carry out an inspection as well as gas and electrical safety checks. We will also do any essential repairs before you move in. When you view the property we will tell you what repairs we are going to do and you will accept the tenancy on that basis. From then on you are responsible for decorating the inside of your home and for certain repairs.

See **Decorating and repairs** on page 17 and your **Repairs Handbook**.

Can I put in my own fittings?

You can put in fittings such as shelves and wall cupboards, as long as you do not damage or remove anything or alter the property. **If you want to make alterations, you must write to us to ask our permission. You must not go ahead until we have given you permission.** See **Improvements** on page 29.



Do you have any spare keys to my home?

We will give you the keys to your home. It is your responsibility to get spare copies. If you share an entrance door or if your key is part of a suite of locks, we will give you keys or fobs at the beginning of your tenancy. If you lose or break these or you want a spare copy for a relative, we will provide the new keys but we will charge you for them.

What if I am a first-time tenant?

We want you to be happy and settled in your home. Being a tenant brings with it some new responsibilities and we understand that renting a home for the first time can be a bit overwhelming. We are happy to offer advice whenever we can.

Your **Repairs Handbook** gives some useful advice about looking after your home and carrying out simple household tasks.



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Household changes

Let us know if anyone comes to live with you permanently or leaves to live somewhere else.

Joint tenancies

A joint tenancy is when more than one person is named in the Tenancy Agreement.

Partners (married or unmarried) or single people wanting to share a home will usually be offered a joint tenancy at the beginning of a tenancy.

Each tenant is jointly and individually responsible for the tenancy. This means that:

- each tenant is responsible for making sure that the rent and other charges are paid in full; and
- if one tenant breaks the conditions of the agreement, the other (or others) can also be held responsible.

Each tenant has equal rights. This means that:

- any tenant can apply for Housing Benefit or Universal Credit; and
- if one tenant dies, the other (or others) continues as the tenant.

If you want someone to become a joint tenant during your tenancy, we will normally allow this if they are a partner by marriage (or by a civil partnership) or someone who has been living with you for at least 12 months.

The tenancy can be ended by any one of the joint tenants by giving us four weeks' notice in writing. When this happens, the tenancy ends for the other (or others) too, even if they do not agree to ending the tenancy.

In some situations, we may give a new tenancy to the remaining tenant(s) for the same home. See **Family or relationship break-up** on page 21.

You should think carefully before giving up a sole tenancy by changing to a joint tenancy. It is not easy to change back to a sole tenancy.

Passing on your tenancy

When a tenant dies, the tenancy will automatically pass to any joint tenant. If there is no joint tenant, a partner (married or not, or in a civil partnership or not) or an adult member of the family who was living with them when they died, and at least the 12 month period before the death, may be allowed to take over the tenancy of the home.

The person taking over the tenancy is called a successor.

Usually a tenancy can only be passed on once in this way. When a tenant dies, we will talk to anyone left in the home about their housing options. If the home is not suitable for the person taking over the home, we may ask them to move to a different home, for example if they do not need sheltered accommodation or the home is too big for their needs. For an explanation of what may happen in your situation, contact the Choice Services Centre.

You can pass on your tenancy before you die but only to someone who could have taken it over after your death. This is called an assignment. You must contact us if you want to carry out an assignment of your tenancy.

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Who can live in my home with me?

Any members of your immediate family may share your home and you can take in lodgers as long as it does not cause overcrowding. In the letter we sent you when we offered you the tenancy we will have told you how many people are allowed to live in your home.

You can sublet part of your home (but not all of it), but first you will need to get our approval in writing. You must always continue to live in your home as your only or main home. See **Sub-letting and taking in lodgers** on page 15. Remember, you must include any income you receive from lodgers or subtenants in the information you give for claiming benefits or to HM Revenue and Customs for assessing tax.



What if my household size changes?

If your family increases, or you have relatives who want to come and live with you, you should let Choice Services Centre know. If you need a larger home, you can apply for a transfer or look for someone to exchange homes with. See **Applying to move** on page 37.



What if I get married or have a new partner?

If you get married or enter into a civil partnership or want to share your home with someone else during your tenancy, we may allow him or her to become a joint tenant. We will investigate their present housing situation before agreeing. See **Joint tenancies** on page 19.

Who can take over the tenancy when I die or leave the home?

If you have a joint tenancy, it will usually remain with the other tenant or tenants. Otherwise, your husband, wife, partner or other adult member of the family may have the right to take over the tenancy if they have been living with you. See **Passing on your tenancy** on page 19.



Can someone become a joint tenant with me?

We will usually offer a joint tenancy to partners (whether you are married or not married, or in a civil partnership) or other family members at the beginning of a tenancy. This gives both partners equal rights and powers. See **Joint tenancies** on page 19.

What if I need specialist help?

If you are having difficulties living in your home, we can help you in a number of ways. Contact the Choice Services Centre and discuss your needs with them. We will then look into what options are available to you in terms of services in your existing home or whether you could move to another more suitable home. See **Extra care services** on page 35.

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Household changes

Family or relationship break-up

Act quickly to protect your rights. Only a court has the power to force you to move out of your home.

Your rights

- Joint tenants have equal rights to stay in the home but either one may end the tenancy. We may transfer the tenancy to the other partner.
- If you are not joint tenants, the person whose name is on the Tenancy Agreement has the right to ask their partner to leave the home.
- If you are not joint tenants and the person who is named as the tenant on the Tenancy Agreement leaves the home, the remaining partner has no automatic right to stay in the home.
- If you have children living with you, a court will normally put their interests first to make sure they do not become homeless. The court will usually give the tenancy to the parent who has the main care and responsibility for the children.
- We can only make a tenant leave his or her home if a court makes the decision and gives us a 'Possession Order'. Usually, the court must be sure that there are good reasons to allow us to make the tenant leave.

Domestic violence

If you are suffering from domestic violence, contact Women's Aid, the police and a solicitor. Most police stations have domestic violence units with specially trained officers.

Women's Aid offer support to men and women suffering from domestic violence.

How to get help

- Contact the Choice Services Centre. We can arrange for a member of staff to discuss your situation with you. The details of any conversation you have with members of the team will be kept confidential. See **Access to and control of personal information** on page 15.
- You should also go to a specialist who can advise you about your particular situation. For example:
 - advice agencies (such as the Citizens' Advice, Choice Financial Inclusion Team or a local law office) about money problems;
 - the Housing Rights Service for housing advice;
 - Relate (relationship counselling) about family problems;
 - the Housing Executive's local office or their Homeless Advice Centre in Belfast, for advice about your housing options; or
 - a solicitor about your legal rights.

See **Useful contacts** on page 44 for phone numbers of some of these organisations.

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Do I have the right to stay in my home?

This depends on whether you are named as a tenant on the Tenancy Agreement, whether you and your partner are married or not, or in a civil partnership, and whether you have children living with you. See **Your rights** on page 15.



Can the name or names on the Tenancy Agreement be changed?

The name of a joint tenant can only be removed from a Tenancy Agreement if both the joint tenants agree. We will also have to agree to the change. If no agreement can be reached, only a court has the power to enforce a change of tenancy. The court will make its decision based on how long you have been together, whether you have children, and who is going to look after them.

Who can end the tenancy?

Anyone named in the Tenancy Agreement can end the tenancy, even if it is a joint tenancy. If your partner wants to end the tenancy but you do not, it may be possible to get an Order from a Court to stop the action. Alternatively, you may be able to apply for a single tenancy in your own name. Your Housing Officer can give you advice on this.



Can my partner make me leave the home?

You should not give up your rights to stay in your home without first getting legal advice. If you are joint tenants and married or in a civil partnership, you both have the same right to stay. If you cannot agree about who is going to leave, only a court can decide. If you are not married or not in a civil partnership and are not the tenant, you need to get advice quickly about what you can do. Contact the Citizens' Advice or a solicitor to discuss the situation. See **Useful contacts** on page 44.



What can I do if I am the victim of domestic violence?

If you are threatened with, or are the victim of, acts of violence from members of your household or an ex-partner, you may want help. See **Domestic violence** on page 21.



What if I want to move out and want to pass my tenancy on to someone else?

If you are the tenant named in the Tenancy Agreement, you can ask for your tenancy to be passed on to one or more people who want to stay in the home. We will look into the situation but will not necessarily agree to this. Contact your Housing Officer.



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Family break-up

Living in your home

Parking

- **If you want to park a certain type of vehicle (including caravans, boats or trailers), you must ask for our permission in writing.**
- No tenant has a right to a particular parking space.
- We cannot guarantee parking spaces for all tenants.
- We may arrange to get your car or vehicle removed if you park where parking is not allowed; it is dangerous or blocking people's way; or is untaxed. Remember, emergency vehicles must be able to get access to buildings at any time.
- You must not use car-parking areas to carry out major repairs to vehicles.
- Untaxed vehicles must not be parked in communal parking areas.
- Tenants must apply for permission if they wish to install an electric vehicle charging point. These may not be approved in all instances and are likely to be refused where homes do not have their own dedicated driveway.

Pets

- You may keep a pet in your home as long as you are a responsible owner. **No permission is required to keep small pets such as fish or small caged animals and birds.**
- **If you wish to keep a cat, dog or any other larger animal, you must get permission first.** A form can be requested from Choice Services Centre or your Housing Officer.
- Permission will be limited to one large pet per household.
- Pets must be kept under control at all times. If you allow your pet to cause a nuisance (such a dog barking continually inside or outside your home), or it is causing a health hazard, we will ask you to find it a new home. If necessary, we will take legal action against you.
- Your pet must not roam or foul in shared or public areas.

Your garden

Unless it is a shared or communal garden, you are responsible for:

- keeping the garden tidy and free of rubbish; and
- making sure shrubs and hedges do not become a nuisance to neighbours.

We are responsible for maintaining fences, boundary walls and any steps and paths that lead to your front and back doors, but not other garden paths.

You need permission to:

- put up a shed, greenhouse, decking or other structure;
- put up a new or different fence or put in a pond or patio;
- carry out planting in an 'open plan' area; or
- cut, lop or prune an existing tree, remove a tree or hedge, or plant a new tree.

Getting rid of rubbish

- Your local council will collect household waste regularly. Please recycle as much as possible. Your local council will have advice on how to do this. In some areas they will collect certain items for recycling.
- Do not mix garden waste with household waste. Please compost it, otherwise take it to your local recycling centre. See **Caring for the environment** on page 41.
- Your council will not collect bulky items with household waste. Take these to your local household recycling centre or contact your council who may provide a service to collect them. They will usually charge you for this.
- If you lose or damage your wheeled bin, you can buy a new one from Choice or your local council.

Storage of Mobility Scooters

Choice has a policy on Mobility Scooters. There are rules which you must follow if you have, or plan to get, a mobility scooter. Please contact Choice for further information.

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Can I take in lodgers or sublet part of my home?

You can take in a lodger as long as you do not overcrowd your home and the lodger lives with you like any member of the family. **If you allow someone to live separately in part of your home, this is subletting and you must have our permission to do this.** You cannot sublet all of your home, and you must continue to live in it. See **Household changes** on page 19. If you receive any money from lodgers or subtenants, this may reduce any benefits you receive. Contact the Housing Executive's office in your local area. See **Useful contacts** on page 44.



Who is responsible for repairing fences, gardens and shared areas?

We will look after any open areas or shared gardens we own, and the boundary fences and walls around our properties. You are responsible for your own garden. See **Your garden** on page 23.



Can I keep pets?

You must seek permission to keep a pet in any Choice accommodation. You must also be a responsible owner. If you live in a flat or sheltered accommodation, you can only keep certain types of pets. See **Pets** on page 23.

How do I get rid of rubbish?

Your council collects household waste regularly. Ask your neighbours which day of the week they come to your area. In sheltered schemes you need to take your rubbish to the common bins in the scheme's bin store. See **Getting rid of rubbish** on page 23. We encourage you to recycle as much as possible. See **Caring for the environment** on page 41.

Can I run a business from my home?

Your home is meant to be used as a home. **You must not run a business from your home without our permission in writing. We will only give permission if we are sure that the business will not disturb your neighbours.** Discuss your plans with us. Contact Choice Services Centre. We will take immediate action against anyone carrying out any criminal, illegal or immoral activity in the home, for example prostitution or drug dealing.



Can I put up a satellite dish?

You need our permission to put up a satellite dish. Discuss your plans with us. Contact Choice Services Centre.

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Living in your home

Flats and apartments

If you live in a flat, bedsit or apartment, you need to treat your neighbours with extra consideration and respect. You are also responsible for helping us look after the shared areas.

Respecting your neighbours

- Keep the sound from music systems, radios and TVs at reasonable levels.
- Use waste collection areas properly and make sure that you leave the surrounding areas tidy.
- Do not throw or drop anything from balconies or windows.

Safety

- You should familiarise yourself with the fire exits in your building. A copy of the fire evacuation procedure will be in your sign-up pack and displayed in the communal areas of the building.
- Keep all shared entrances, passageways, stairs and other areas with shared access free of obstructions such as bikes, toys, prams or rubbish. This is for the safety and easy access of the people living in a scheme or block, or any visitors.
- Use door-entry systems properly to keep buildings secure:
 - make sure the entrance door locks properly behind you. Never leave it propped open;
 - do not let people who do not live in the block follow you in, even if they appear genuine. They should press the button for the flat they are visiting; and
 - report any faults to Choice Services Centre immediately.

Storage of Mobility Scooters

Choice has a policy on Mobility Scooters. There are rules which you must follow if you have, or plan to get, a mobility scooter. Please contact Choice for further information.

Shared areas and facilities

Cleaning

We have employed cleaners or appointed contractors to clean windows, staircases, corridors, hallways and landings in shared areas. Also, the outside of windows in most blocks of flats are cleaned six times a year.

Repairs

Please report any problems with lighting or repairs needed in the shared areas and facilities of the block to the Choice Services Centre.

Heating

Some blocks of flats have shared heating systems. We will adjust them depending on the weather and time of year.

Lifts

All lifts are serviced and maintained by a specialist firm. Contact Choice Services Centre to report any problems, in an emergency or if you hear the lift alarm. If you are in sheltered accommodation, use the emergency alarm system to call for help, or contact the scheme coordinator.

Shared gardens and paths

All shared gardens, footpaths and roads owned by Choice are maintained by grounds maintenance contractors. The gardens are for everyone living in the building to enjoy. It is important that you, members of your household and any visitors respect other people who use the gardens and help to keep them pleasant places to be in and to look at.

Correct use of bin areas

Contamination of recycling bins and casual dumping is an ongoing problem. Tenants should ensure that they are disposing of all waste responsibly and in the correct bins provided.

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Who is responsible for shared areas and gardens?

We are responsible for looking after any shared areas and shared gardens we own. This includes cutting grass and looking after the paths, drying areas, fencing, lighting, entry phones and lifts. It will also include removing any graffiti. Please report any repairs or other problems to Choice Services Centre.



You should show respect for other people who use any shared gardens and help to keep them pleasant places to be in and look at. See **Shared gardens** on page 25.

We will tell you well in advance when we are going to do any major renovation work or programmed painting to the building you live in.

It is important that no-one living in flats stores or leaves any items outside their flats or in shared areas. See **Safety** on page 25.

Who is responsible for cleaning the shared areas?

Cleaning landings, stairs and hallways is carried out either by cleaners employed by us or contractors appointed by us. See **Cleaning** on page 25.



Who is responsible for TV aerials and satellite dishes?

Some blocks of flats have shared television aerials. If you are having difficulties with reception, first check with your neighbours to see whether they are also having problems. The problem may just be with your own television. However, if others are also affected, contact Choice Services Centre.



If you want to put up a satellite dish you need permission from our maintenance team. Contact Choice Services Centre.

What can be done about noise in flats?

In blocks of flats, noise can be heard more easily between floors and walls. We expect our residents to show extra consideration and respect for their neighbours. See **Respecting your neighbours** on page 25.

If there is a problem in your block of flats you should try to discuss this with the people concerned, but if the problem does not improve we will try and help. Contact Choice Services Centre.



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Flats and apartments

Safety in the home

Gas safety and what to do if you smell gas

- **Don't use anything electrical**, for example, door bells, switches or even your phone (not even a mobile).
- **Open** doors and windows to get rid of the gas.
- **Check** if the gas has been left on unlit or if a pilot light has gone out.
- **Turn off** the gas at the meter.
- **Don't smoke** or light a flame.
- **For a gas emergency in NI**, tenants should phone the 24-hour Northern Ireland Gas Emergency Service on **0800 002 001** using a phone outside your home (and away from any gas meters). When they come, they will make the situation safe and will leave you a notice about what they have done. You then need to contact the Choice Services Centre.
- **Do not** remove or block air vents.
- **Do not carry out any repairs, removals or changes to gas appliances or fittings without getting advice or permission.**

Explosive or flammable liquids or materials

You should not keep or use bottled gas, paraffin or petrol in your home or in a shared area. If you need to keep small quantities of these, you should make sure that you keep them outside in a safe place away from any heat and out of the sight and reach of children or where they can be found by vandals.

Electrical safety

- Unplug any appliances that are not in use.
- Use the correct fuses in plugs.
- Disconnect the electricity supply to any faulty switch or socket.
- Don't touch bare wires. Turn off the electricity at the consumer unit (fuse box).
- Don't touch anything electrical if it is wet or if your hands are wet. Turn off the electricity at the consumer unit (fuse box) and don't use it again until it is dry.
- Use one appliance at a time in a socket. If necessary, use a multi-point extension lead.
- **Don't carry out any electrical alterations or improvements without our permission.**
- Don't put nails or fittings in a wall near a socket, switch or light fitting, or around the edge of the wall, as this is usually where electrical wires are put behind plaster.
- When using portable appliances or tools outside, make sure you use a circuit breaker device (usually fitted on your extension lead).

Door-entry systems

Door-entry systems control who comes into buildings with shared entrances. To keep your building safe:

- make sure that the entrance door always locks behind you;
- never leave the entrance door open or propped open;
- do not let people who do not live in the block follow you inside, even if they appear genuine. They should press the button for the flat they are visiting; and
- report any faults to Choice Services Centre immediately.

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Preventing fires

If you live in an apartment block, you should familiarise yourself with the fire exits in your building. A copy of the fire evacuation procedure will be in your sign-up pack and displayed in the communal areas of the building.

- There are smoke detectors in all our properties.
- Test your detector regularly and report any faults to Choice Services Centre.
- Before going to bed at night or when you go out, make sure all fires are out and make sure you have put out all cigarettes.
- Ensure no clothes, curtains or other combustible materials are left close to electric heaters.
- Do not use chip pans and do not leave candles lit if no-one is in the room. They can easily catch fire.

Preventing carbon monoxide fumes

- Keep rooms well-ventilated and make sure vents are not blocked or closed.
- Sweep chimneys at least once a year, if used for wood or coal fires.
- Buy officially approved appliances marked with the British Standard Kitemark.
- Use Gas Safe (formerly CORGI) registered gas installers to fit and service your own gas appliances.
- Check and service gas appliances regularly:
 - **by law, we must carry out a gas safety check on all appliances once a year.** You must allow us into your home to do this check;
 - we will service and repair all appliances we have installed; and
 - you must get your own appliances serviced regularly.

Security suggestions

- Mark valuable items with your postcode and house number, or keep a note of serial numbers.
- When you go away, you might think of fitting a timer device to a lamp in the living room to make the house look as if someone is in. If you are going away for a long time, please let us know.
- Arrange with a neighbour to keep an eye on each other's houses.
- When you go out, check that all windows and doors are closed.
- Do not leave your keys, money or valuables where a stranger might find them or see them through a window, or reach them through the letter box.

When someone calls at your home

- If you have a door viewer, check to see who it is before opening the door.
- If you don't know the caller, ask to see their identity card and check it carefully. If you are not sure about them, ask them to stay outside while you phone the organisation they say they represent to check who they are.
- Anyone who comes to your home to carry out a repair, inspection or gas service will have an identity card with their photo on it. You should check the card carefully. Also, check that they are coming to do a repair or servicing you are expecting and that the number on their works order is the same as the job reference number we gave you when you reported your repair. This also appears in your repair acknowledgement letter. If you are at all unsure, ask them to stay outside and phone the Choice Services Centre.

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Safety in the home

Improvements

Changes to your home

We allow you to put in fittings such as shelves and wall cupboards without our permission but you must not damage or remove anything that belongs to Choice. You may also carry out other changes or alterations to your home but you must discuss your plans with us first. You should then write to us, giving full details of what you plan to do. We will write back to you with an answer within one month.

Once you have completed the changes we have agreed to, we may be responsible for any repairs. **You must not start this work before we have given you our permission. You must also comply with any restrictions we have stipulated included in our permission response.**

Changes you need permission for may include:

- laying floor tiles, or wood or laminate flooring;
- removing a wall or partitioning;
- installing or removing a gas supply;
- moving radiators;
- putting in your own heating system;
- installing a shower;
- changing kitchen or bathroom fittings;
- putting up a radio aerial or satellite dish;
- installing an electric vehicle charging point;
- laying patios; and
- changing windows or doors.

If we find out that you have made changes to your home without our permission, we may ask you to change it back to its original condition. If we have to do this, we will charge you for the costs involved.

Compensation

At the end of your tenancy you may get compensation for certain improvements you have done. We can give you a list of what kind of improvements these are.

We can only pay compensation at the end of your tenancy. The amount will be based on the original cost of the improvement and how long it has been in use.

We will not pay compensation if:

- **you did not get our permission in writing before you did the work;**
- we have had to evict you because you broke the tenancy conditions;
- you put in your claim for compensation too late. You must claim no later than two weeks after the end of your tenancy; or
- the amount of compensation comes to less than £50.

Major repairs or improvements we will carry out

We put together a programme of major repairs and improvements to our properties and surrounding areas once a year. We will put the most urgent problems first and the amount we do will depend on what money we have available. We will consult you, well ahead of time, about any work we expect to do in your home (for example, double-glazing or a new heating system).

If you need to be rehoused for a short time:

- we may pay specific allowances;
- you will pay no more than the rent you normally pay; and
- we may give you the choice of staying in the property where you have been rehoused rather than returning to the home you have left.

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Will you carry out any improvements to my home?

We may carry out major repairs and improvements as part of our strategic plan. The work we decide to do will be based on information we collect from surveys we do from time to time. See **Major repairs or improvements we will carry out** on page 29.



Can I put in my own fittings or make changes to my home?

You can put in fittings such as shelves and wall cupboards, as long as you do not damage or remove anything or alter our property. **If you want to make alterations, you must write to us to ask our permission.** We need full details of the work and who will carry it out. **You must not go ahead until we have given you permission. You may also need to apply for planning permission and building regulations approval.** We will tell you how to do this. See **Changes to your home** on page 29.

What help is there if I or a member of my household becomes disabled?

If you need to have adaptations done to your home, contact the Choice Services Centre to discuss what you need. We can do certain changes, such as putting in lever taps or grab rails, but for more costly or complicated changes you will have to contact your doctor or local health trust who will assess your situation and make a recommendation to us. We will then carry out the work. Examples of such adaptations are ramps to doors and special bathroom fittings. See **Extra care services** on page 35.



Can I be compensated for any improvements I make?

You may get compensation for certain types of improvement. We can only pay the compensation at the end of your tenancy. See **Compensation** on page 29.



When I leave my home, what do I do about any changes I have made?

If you have removed or changed any of our fixtures or fittings, you must change them back to their original condition unless we have agreed to the changes. **If you have done alterations which were not carried out properly or were done without our permission, we may make you change them back or bring them up to the correct standard.** If you leave without changing this we will charge you for our costs for doing it after you have gone.

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Improvements

Neighbours

We expect you and your visitors to be considerate to your neighbours. This is a condition of your Tenancy Agreement.

Getting on together

We encourage our tenants to make the best of their communities and surroundings. You should consider your neighbours when you go about your everyday life and understand that people have different lifestyles. See **Being considerate** below.

We expect you to accept reasonable activities such as:

- children playing;
- use of television or music systems; and
- people getting up, leaving and returning to their home, and preparing meals at different times.

If a neighbour's activity becomes unreasonable, you should try to discuss the problem calmly and agree how the situation can be improved. See **What to do** opposite.

Being considerate

- Make sure that you mow lawns and do housework, such as washing and vacuuming, at reasonable times.
- Keep the noise you make at reasonable levels, particularly the sound from radios, music systems and TVs.
- If you have a dog, do not leave it barking constantly in your home or outside in the garden, you must also clear up any mess it makes.
- Warn neighbours when you are going to do something particularly noisy such as DIY or having a party.
- Make sure your children play without disturbing other people.

What to do

Talk to your neighbour

When people live close together, they often do not realise that they are disturbing other people. If you are being disturbed, the first thing to do is to explain politely to the people involved that they are causing you a problem.

Talk to us

If the problem continues, please contact us. We will treat all complaints seriously and treat all the information we receive as confidential.


So that we can help you, you will need to keep a diary of the problem, including any contact with the police and any incident log numbers they give you. If we find your complaint is malicious or has no real basis, we will take no further action and we will make a note on your file.

In cases of extreme and continuous noise or pollution, your local council's environmental health section can take action. They deal with problems such as noise, poorly kept animals, rubbish, smoke, fumes and gases. We can tell you how to contact them.

Talk to the local mediation service

Many problems between neighbours can be sorted out by talking through the different views and coming to an agreement. If you would like help to do this, you can ask us to refer you to a mediation service in your area. Mediation services provide independent mediators who discuss the issues with everyone involved in a professional, calm way and help them come to an agreement. They are trained to deal with a variety of situations. They will be understanding but will not take sides. We will pay for this service.

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What should I do if I am having problems with my neighbour?

We expect neighbours to be considerate and tolerant, but sometimes they do not realise they are upsetting you. See **Getting on together** on page 31. Firstly, you should try to discuss the matter with your neighbour in a calm and friendly way. If the problem is a clash of lifestyles and personalities, it may be a good idea to get an independent mediator to help you come to an understanding. See **What to do** on page 31.



What can you do to help?

We will investigate any matters you bring to our attention. If it is an argument between neighbours, we may not take any action, but your Housing Officer is always happy to advise you. If a tenant, a member of their household or visitor continually causes a nuisance and we can show that they have broken the Tenancy Agreement, we may apply to court for a court injunction to control their behaviour or a court order to make that tenant leave their home. If necessary we will work with the police.

Can I be rehoused?

We aim to deal with the problem rather than move you to another home. If the problem involves anti-social behaviour or harassment, we will carry out an investigation and will take prompt action. See **Anti-social behaviour** on page 33.

What can be done about noise in flats?

Flats cannot be completely soundproof. Noise can be heard easily through floors and walls. We expect neighbours to be tolerant and to show each other respect. If you are troubled by noise, you should try and discuss with your neighbour how they might change their behaviour. See **Being considerate** and **What to do** on page 31.



What if I cause nuisance to a neighbour?

If you, a member of your family or a visitor to your home cause any nuisance to neighbours, you are breaking the conditions of your Tenancy Agreement. If the nuisance does not stop, we will take action against you. We may even make you leave your home. See **Breaking the conditions of your tenancy** on page 13.



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Neighbours

Anti-social behaviour and harassment

All our tenants are responsible for the behaviour of members of their household and visitors.

What is anti-social behaviour?

Anti-social behaviour is any behaviour or action that interferes unreasonably with the quality of life of other residents or prevents them living peacefully in their homes and surroundings. It includes nuisance, which is persistent behaviour or disturbance which causes distress to other people, such as:

- loud music;
- arguments, shouting, swearing or slamming doors;
- selling, storing or taking drugs;
- dogs barking or making a mess;
- playing ball games close to someone else's home;
- smoke or fumes from bonfires or barbecues;
- inconsiderate parking or abandoned cars;
- drunken behaviour; and
- conducting any criminal, illegal or immoral activities in or around your home.

What is harassment?

Harassment is interfering with a person's peace, comfort or safety. It can be physical or verbal abuse or intimidation, and includes attacks on and damage to property. It can be a criminal offence if someone harasses you because of your ethnic origin, nationality, religion, political opinion, race, colour, sex, sexuality, disability or age.

Equality and diversity

- We will act fairly in our dealings with you.
- We will act swiftly and firmly to stop any kind of discrimination.

How we deal with anti-social behaviour and harassment


We take seriously any claim of both anti-social behaviour and harassment in or around the areas where we own properties.

- We will respond promptly to any claim you make to us.
- We will carry out an investigation, collect evidence and, if necessary, take action. We will keep clear records of what action we take.
- We will support anyone who is suffering from anti-social behaviour, as well as anyone who is willing to be a witness.
- We will work with tenants and other agencies, including the police, the Housing Executive and councils, to stop and prevent nuisance, harassment or abuse.
- We take action to evict any tenant who is convicted of anti-social behaviour or harassment (make them leave their home).

Our policy on anti-social behaviour and harassment can be found on our website. You can also request a copy from us.

Zero tolerance policy - our team will not stand for any form of abuse. Choice operates a zero tolerance policy in respect of abuse or threatening behavior towards our staff or contractors.

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What action can I take?

If you are frightened because of the offensive or abusive behaviour of a neighbour or visitor towards you or a member of your family, you should get in touch with the police immediately. Always ask them for an incident log number. You should also contact Choice Services Centre. We will need a record of the problem, so you should keep a diary of events. We will investigate the problem and may be able to take action. You can also take legal action against the person concerned. You will need to contact a solicitor.



What can you do to help?

The Tenancy Agreement covers the behaviour of tenants, other members of their household and visitors. By signing it, all our tenants have agreed to behave in a responsible way toward their neighbours. See **What is anti-social behaviour?** and **What is harassment?** on page 33. We can take legal action if one of our tenants has clearly broken the conditions of their Tenancy Agreement. See **Responsibilities** on page 13 and **How we deal with anti-social behaviour** on page 33.



Can I be rehoused?

We would try to sort out the problem without rehousing you. However, if you are clearly being harassed, we may be able to help you apply to transfer to another property. Contact Choice Services Centre.



What if I'm worried about a neighbour?

If you think a neighbour is having difficulties and needs help, we may be able to approach them and discuss their needs. Contact Choice Services Centre. We will treat as confidential whatever you tell us.



What if I am worried about being secure in my home?

All our homes are fitted with standard security locks, but if you are worried about security, we are happy to discuss your concerns and give advice. Contact Choice Services Centre and explain your concerns to them.

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Anti-social behaviour and harassment

Extra care services

We are aware that some of our tenants have particular needs. We can help in various ways.

Help to live more easily in your home

If you or anyone living with you find some aspects of living in your home difficult because of a medical condition or disability, you can get help without necessarily having to move. This may include:

- arranging for someone to come in and help you with basic domestic or personal tasks;
- carrying out adaptations such as fitting a ramp or extra handrails, lowering worktops, fitting showers or changing taps;
- putting in specialised equipment for you to use in your home; or
- giving you advice and information.

If you would like to find out about any of these options, you should contact your local health trust.

If you need to have adaptations done to your home, contact Choice Services Centre to discuss what you need. We can do certain changes, such as putting in lever taps or grab rails, but for more costly or complicated changes you will have to contact your doctor or local health trust who will assess your situation and make a recommendation to us.

Emergency alarm connection

If you do not live in a scheme that already has an alarm system, you may be able to arrange for your home to be connected to a 24-hour emergency alarm system. Choice does not provide such a system but if you contact Choice Services Centre they will tell you about organisations that provide such services. You may have to pay for the service directly but it can provide you with peace of mind knowing that you can call someone at any time if you need help.

Supported and sheltered housing

■ **Supported housing.** These are schemes where we are able to house people with specific needs such as physical disabilities, learning difficulties or mental health needs. Supported Housing schemes may be adapted to meet a tenants physical needs but also provide support staff to assist tenants with day-to-day living.

■ **Sheltered housing.** These are groups (schemes) of self-contained bungalows or flats which are all connected to a 24 hour emergency alarm system. Most schemes have shared laundry facilities and some also have guest rooms for visitors.

Each scheme has a coordinator whose duties include:

- contacting tenants regularly to check they are alright;
- responding to emergencies, giving emergency aid or calling for emergency services;
- keeping in touch with families and any support services for example, doctors, home helps and social care assistants; and
- encouraging tenants to arrange social activities and to make full use of the shared facilities.

This type of housing allows tenants to live independently but have on-call support from a scheme coordinator and an emergency alarm system. This gives them peace of mind and makes them feel secure.

Safeguarding and Protection from Abuse

Choice is committed to ensuring that everyone is safeguarded and protected against abuse. This includes all children living in and visiting Choice properties, all young people and adults in Choice's sheltered/supported schemes in need of protection, as well as people in general needs properties.

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What should I do if I need some help at home?

If you are having difficulty living in your home, we can help you in a number of ways. Contact Choice Services Centre. We will discuss your needs, tell you what we can do or tell you who else to contact.

Can I get help if I want to stay in my own home?

Yes, there are various services to help people who have special needs to live independently in their communities. You may be able to arrange to have adaptations made to your home, or to receive specialist care services in your home. See **Help to live more easily in your home** on page 35.



How long will I have to wait for an adaptation?

This depends on the number of people wanting adaptations and the amount of work involved. For more costly or complex adaptations, you first need to get an assessment from the Occupational Therapy Department of your local health trust. See **Useful contacts** on page 44.

What type of housing is available and where?

We have different types of housing available. Where possible, we will offer you the home most suitable for your needs, whether due to age or disability. See **Supported and sheltered housing** on page 35. If you want to apply for supported or sheltered housing, you need to fill in an application form. We will send one to you and, if you need help, we can arrange for someone to go through it with you. Contact Choice Services Centre.



What if I feel unsafe in my home?

If you are elderly or feel vulnerable for any other reason and you do not live in a sheltered or supported scheme, you could arrange for your home to be connected to an emergency alarm system. See **Emergency alarm connection** on page 35. Contact Choice Services Centre to discuss.

What should I do if I am being subjected to abuse or I suspect someone is being abused?

You can report your concerns directly to Social Services (a list of contact numbers can be found on Page 44) or to the police, or Choice Services Centre.

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Extra care services

Applying to move

If you want to move you can ask us to consider you for a transfer or you can look for another tenant who would like to exchange homes with you.

Transferring to another home

You can apply to transfer to another home owned by us, another housing association or the Housing Executive if:

- you do not owe us any rent or other charges;
- your home is in good condition;
- you have lived in your present home for at least two years; and
- you have not breached your Tenancy Agreement or been found guilty of unacceptable behaviour.

You need to fill in an application form. If your application meets the criteria, you will go on the Common Waiting List, which covers all areas of Northern Ireland. We will then:

- visit you and assess your needs for a new home;
- award you points based on your level of need; and
- put you on the lists for the areas you wish to move to.

You will only be considered for the type of home suitable for your size of family and the area (or areas) you have asked for. We cannot say how long it will be before you get the opportunity to move. It will depend on:

- the number of people waiting to move to the area you want to move to;
- the number of homes becoming available in the area you want to move to; and
- how urgently you need to move.

You might consider other options for getting a new home. See **Exchanging homes** opposite.

Exchanging homes

You can exchange with another of our tenants or with a tenant of another housing association, the Housing Executive or other social landlord in the United Kingdom.

Before you go ahead, you must get our approval in writing. **If you exchange without permission, you can be made to move back, or legal action may be progressed.**

If the other tenant is not our tenant, they will need to get in touch with their landlord to ask permission.

Before giving approval, each landlord will:


- check that their property is in good condition;
- identify repairs that the tenants must do before leaving; and
- check whether their tenant owes any rent.

We will usually give approval, but not if:

- a property is larger than necessary, or is not big enough for the new tenant's household, or has adaptations that the new tenant does not need;
- the other landlord is a social housing provider that cannot allow the exchange; or
- either landlord is in the process of taking legal action to make their tenant leave their home.

When you exchange you are not given a new tenancy. The other tenant transfers their tenancy to you (assigns). Both tenants must accept and take responsibility for the other property in the condition in which it is left. Your landlord will not carry out any change of tenancy repairs, except those required to comply with Health and Safety legislation.

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Can I move to another property in the local area?

Yes. If you have a Secure Tenancy (not an Introductory Tenancy) you can apply to move by filling in an application form and being accepted onto the common waiting list for the whole of Northern Ireland. Your position on the list is based on your level of need compared to others on the list. See **Transferring to another home** on page 37.

If you want to widen your options, you could consider exchanging homes with another tenant. See **Exchanging homes** on page 37.



How long will I have to wait to move?

This will depend on the type of property and area you want to move to, and your level of housing need compared to others on the waiting list. Only people with really urgent housing need are likely to get the opportunity to move.

Can I swap homes with someone else?

Yes. This is called a 'mutual exchange'. The tenants involved need to apply in writing to their landlord(s) to get approval. See **Exchanging homes** on page 37. You are responsible for finding someone to exchange with. Exchange partners are often found by word of mouth, notices in shop windows, advertising in newspapers, online or via the Homeswapper website.

For exchanges with people in other parts of Northern Ireland or other parts of the United Kingdom, see **Can I move to another part of Northern Ireland or the United Kingdom?** below.



Can I move to another part of Northern Ireland or the United Kingdom?

Homeswapper is the UK's largest homeswap service and it is free to all Housing Executive and most NI Housing Association tenants. It is an online service which you can use to advertise your home for exchange and look for suitable homes that are available for exchange. You can use Homeswapper by logging onto www.homeswapper.co.uk and registering to use the service. If you find a suitable property, you and the other tenant will both need to contact your landlord(s) and complete the application forms for exchange.

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Applying to move

Moving out

You need to let us know at least 4 weeks before the date you plan to leave.

You need to send a letter or e-mail to Choice Services Centre. All tenancies end at midnight on a Sunday.

What happens when you decide to leave

We will:

- visit your home to check its condition and identify any damage you are responsible for; and
- possibly bring new tenants to view the property, by appointment, before you move out. In this way, we can keep the length of time the property is empty to a minimum.

You will:

- hand in all your door keys at our head office or to your Scheme Coordinator or Housing Officer by 12 noon at the latest on the Monday after your tenancy ends (if you do not return the keys, you will have to pay an extra charge);
- let us know your forwarding address; and
- be completely up to date with paying your rent and other charges.

You should be aware of the following:

- we will charge you for any repairs or redecoration that you should have carried out but have failed to do, and for any damage or missing fittings;
- we will charge you for the cost of removing any rubbish you leave behind; and
- if Choice provided you with a wheelie bin, you should leave this behind for the next tenant.

Moving-out checklist

Before handing in the keys, make sure that:

- ✓ the property is clean and you have wiped down all worktops, window sills, kitchen units and tiled floors;
- ✓ all your furniture, carpets and belongings have been removed (including from sheds and lofts);
- ✓ no rubbish is left in the house or garden;
- ✓ you have removed any fittings (such as lights) that you have fitted and put back our standard fittings;
- ✓ you have done any repairs or redecoration that are your responsibility (if you do not do this and we have to carry out the work, we will charge you for the cost of the work once you have left);
- ✓ you have arranged to have your cooker disconnected and removed;
- ✓ you have left behind for the next tenant any instruction leaflets for the appliances in your home, particularly the heating system;
- ✓ energy top-up cards have been left in an accessible location for the next tenant;
- ✓ you have contacted the gas and electricity companies to give them your meter readings (keep a note of the meter readings to check your final bill);
- ✓ you have contacted your phone company and TV licensing office to tell them you are moving;
- ✓ if you claim any benefits, you have told the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, the Social Security Agency and Revenue and Customs that you are moving and you have updated the Universal credit portal with your termination date; and
- ✓ you have made arrangements for your post to be redirected (the post office can do this for you).

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When do I need to tell you that I want to end my tenancy?

If you are moving out, you must let us know in writing at least 4 weeks before the date you want to end your tenancy. The exact date your tenancy ends must be a Sunday. See **What happens when you decide to leave** on page 39.

In the following weeks, you must make various arrangements and be sure you have told others that you are moving. See **Moving-out checklist** on page 39.



What do I do with anything I don't want?

You must remove all your furniture, personal belongings and any rubbish before your tenancy ends. We will charge you for removing anything left behind after the keys have been handed in, including rubbish. See **What happens when you decide to leave** on page 39. You can take any unwanted items or large amounts of rubbish to your local household recycling centre, or you can arrange for your local council to collect them.



What about any changes I have made to my home?

If you have removed any fixtures or fittings, such as light fittings, handles, kitchen units or doors, you must put them back or provide a replacement, unless we agree that this is not necessary. If you do not do this, we will charge you for getting it done on your behalf.

If you have carried out improvements to your home that we authorised, you may be able to claim some compensation. See **Improvements** on page 29.



Where and when do I hand back my keys?

All your keys must be labelled and returned to our head office, your scheme coordinator or Housing Officer before 12 noon (midday) on the Monday after your tenancy ends. If you do not hand them back on time, you may have to pay an extra charge.

What if I still owe rent or other charges when I leave?

If you do not pay everything you owe us, or do not have an arrangement with us about repayment, we will go to court. We may also use a debt collection agency.

What happens if the tenant has died?

We will allow the tenancy to continue for up to 4 weeks to allow the family to clear the property. However, rent must continue to be paid until the keys have been handed in by the executor or a member of the family.

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Moving out

Caring for the environment

We all have a responsibility to look after our environment, reduce our impact on climate change and make our local communities an attractive and healthy place to live.

Waste and recycling

You can reduce waste in a variety of ways, including:

- **Long life food.** A third of the food we buy in the UK ends up being thrown away, so keeping your fridge, freezer and cupboard stocked with long shelf life basics means you'll always have ingredients at hand to make the most of fresh food.
- **Meal planning and reusing leftovers.** By planning meals you can ensure you only buy what you need and you may be able to reuse leftovers rather than throwing them away.
- **Reduce unwanted mail.** Eliminate junk mail by registering for free with the Mail Preference Service to have your name, as well as those of previous residents, removed from direct mail lists. Companies such as energy suppliers and banks will usually offer paperless options.
- **Reduce packaging.** Think about what you buy and consider options which have reduced packaging or packaging which can be recycled.
- **Reduce plastic use.** Microplastics are increasingly recognised as having a significant impact on our environment, so think about ways you can reduce how much plastic you use. For example, using re-usable water bottles instead of plastic bottles, and avoiding plastic bags where possible.
- **Ditch the disposables.** Use products with a longer shelf life, such as energy saving light bulbs (preferably LEDs). You could also buy more concentrated versions of many products, such as your washing detergent or washing up liquid.

- **Nappies.** Globally, more than 300,000 disposable nappies a minute are sent to landfill, incinerated or end up in the environment, including the ocean. Why not use towelling ones at home and just use the disposable ones when you are on holiday and away from home.

There are also a range of ways to reuse and recycle your waste, including:

- **Furniture, clothes and other items.** If you are unable to reuse furniture yourself then a number of organisations and charities may be willing to take good condition furniture. If you are throwing out old clothes, books or other items, you could take them to a local charity shop, a fundraiser sale or a car boot sale. Someone else may want what you are throwing away.
- **Check what your council recycles.** Your council should be able to provide more information on what they can recycle. Most councils will collect paper and cardboard, plastic and glass, using different coloured bins. Some councils will provide a small food caddy bin to help with recycling of food waste.
- **Avoid contamination of bins.** Contamination of recycling bins by materials which can't be recycled can be expensive and can have a major impact. Where communal bins are contaminated, the council may refuse to collect these, which may increase costs for tenants.
- **Recycling reminders.** Making a note on your calendar or fridge will provide a reminder of the day/dates your recycling is collected.
- **Whole house recycling.** It's common for people to recycle in the kitchen but forget other rooms. Recycle the waste from all the bins in your home.

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- **Keep it simple.** Keep your recycling bin next to your main bin so you can take your rubbish and recycling out at the same time.
- **Composting.** If you have a garden, you can get (or make) a compost bin. More information is available at www.nidirect.gov.uk.
- **Disposal of bulky items.** When you no longer need bulky items such as an old sofa, cooker or washing machine, then you must dispose of these safely. Contact your local council for further details.

Climate Change

Climate change is the long-term shift in the Earth’s average temperatures and weather conditions. The climate has changed naturally throughout the Earth’s history, but natural causes cannot explain the particularly rapid warming seen over the last century, with each decade, since the 1980’s, being warmer than the previous one. There are many things you can do to help, including reducing the amount of energy you use, thinking about how you travel, and considering ways to reduce waste.

Transport

- Transport is one of the largest emitting sectors of greenhouse gas emissions in the UK. We can all do our part by following the travel hierarchy, which includes:
- Avoiding unnecessary travel e.g. by working from home.
 - Choosing active travel options for shorter journeys, such as walking or cycling. This will reduce emissions, save money and is good for your health!
 - Consider using public transport options, or car sharing.
 - When buying your next vehicle think about the impact it will have on the environment and consider an alternative, such as a hybrid or electric car. Note that electric vehicle charging may not be available, depending on where you live, especially if you don’t have your own driveway.

Buy Responsibly

We can have a positive impact on the environment by buying goods and materials which are responsibly sourced. For example, consider using locally grown food, and look out for appropriate certifications, such as fairtrade and FSC approved wood. A growing number of companies are now offering second hand furniture, clothing and other items, which reduces waste.

Save Water

- Don’t leave the tap running while you clean your teeth or wash up.
- Try to take showers instead of baths where possible.
- Wait until you have a full load of washing before using your washing machine.
- If you wash your car at home, use a bucket, not a power jet or hosepipe.
- Reuse water where possible e.g. for watering plants.

Biodiversity

- Biodiversity refers to all the variety of life that can be found on Earth as well as the communities that they form and the habitats in which they live. It is widely recognised that there is a biodiversity crisis, with many species and habitats being lost, which has an impact on the health of our planet!
- Addressing the biodiversity crisis will require all of us to consider the impact we have on the environment and any opportunities to deliver positive change. There are many organisations who support conservation and biodiversity protection and so why not consider donating to these groups or volunteering your time to support a local biodiversity project?
- For more information and advice on how you can care for the environment please visit our website at www.choice-housing.org.

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Saving energy

There are a lot of things you can do to save energy at home, including controlling your heating efficiently, washing at 30°C, switching off appliances, and using low energy bulbs.

Heating

Heat and hot water can be provided in different ways and so it is important to understand how to use the heating system and heating controls efficiently in your home. Many homes will have a boiler, with heating controller, room thermostat(s) and thermostatic radiator valves (TRVs). Your heating controller will allow you to set heating to come on at different times whilst your thermostats will help to control how much heat you would like and the temperature in different rooms. Some homes may have electric heaters, normally with controls to allow these to be used efficiently. By understanding how to use your heating controls you may be able to save money, improve comfort and reduce your impact on the environment. You should also consider ways to keep heat in your home more effectively e.g. by only opening windows when necessary (to adequately ventilate your home) and by using curtains in the evening to keep heat in.

Lighting

Fitting energy saving light bulbs in your home can reduce your energy costs. LEDs are now common and could offer savings of up to 80% or more against older types of bulbs. Whilst they may be a little more expensive to buy, along with reducing your energy costs they will normally last significantly longer than older bulbs, reducing waste. A wide variety of styles, colours and wattages are available.

Appliances and energy labels

Energy labels can help you decide which washing machines, dishwashers, fridges and freezers to purchase, based on the amount of energy they use.

This will include typical use and also periods when an appliance is on standby. Some appliances with a higher energy rating may be more expensive to purchase, but could save significant money over time.

As well as choosing the right appliance, the way in which you use them will have an impact on your running costs. When washing clothes, you can save energy by washing at lower temperatures; washing clothes at 30°C instead of a higher temperature can use around 40% less electricity. Always try to wash a full load, and where you can't, then use a half load or economy programme where possible. Your dishwasher may also have an economy programme, or similar, which will help to reduce costs. When cooking, look for cost effective ways to reduce your energy cost e.g. by investing in a slow cooker or air fryer.

Switching Energy Providers

As well as reducing the amount of energy you use, it is important to ensure you aren't paying more than you need to. Your existing energy provider may be able to offer different tariffs and reduce costs, based on paperless billing or your method of payment etc. You can also consider switching energy providers, with some helpful information available from the Consumer Council at www.consumercouncil.org.uk.

For more information on how you can reduce your energy costs, visit the energy section of our website at www.choice-housing.org. You can also find out more information and get tailored advice and support through the NI Energy Advice Line Service on **0800 111 44 55**.

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Emergency services

Northern Ireland Electricity 03457 643 643
 NI Gas Emergency Service 0800 002 001
 Police..... 0845 600 8000
 Police (non-emergency line)..... 101
 Water Service 03457 440 088

Advice agencies

Advice NI 0800 915 4604
 AGE NI 0808 808 7575
 Citizens' Advice 02890 231120
 Disability Action NI..... 02890 297880
 Equality Commission 02890 500600
 Housing Rights Service 02890 245640
 NI Energy Advice Line Service 0800 111 4455
 Law Society of Northern Ireland 02890 231614
 Make the call 0800 232 1271
 Occupational Therapy 0330 0249910
 Social Services Safeguarding Teams
 • Belfast Trust - 02895 041744
 • South Eastern Trust – 02892 501227
 • Northern Trust – 02825 635512
 • Southern Trust – 02837 564423
 • Western Trust – 02871 611366
 (Monday to Friday 9.00am to 5.00pm)
 Universal Credit..... 0800 012 1331
 Welfare Changes Helpline..... 0808 802 0020
 Women's Aid..... 02890 249041

Housing Executive

General enquiries 03448 920900
 Housing Benefit enquiries..... 03448 920900

Other public organisations

Chartered Institute of Housing..... 02890 778222
 Department for Communities..... 02890 829000
 Department of Environment..... 02871 319900
 Northern Ireland Federation of
 Housing Associations 02890 230446
 Ombudsman 0800 343 424
 Consumer Council NI 0800 121 6022

Councils

Antrim & Newtownabbey BC 02890 340000
 Ards & Down BC..... 0300 013 3333
 Armagh City, Banbridge &
 Craigavon BC..0300 0300 900/02838 312400
 Belfast CC 02890 320202
 deaf & hard of hearing users ... 02890 270405
 Causeway Coast & Glens BC... 02870 347034
 Derry City & Strabane DC 02871 253253
 Fermanagh & Omagh DC..... 0300 303 1777
 (Enniskillen Office)
 Lisburn & Castlereagh CC..... 02892 447300
 Mid & East Antrim BC 0300 124 5000
 Mid Ulster DC (Dungannon) 0300 013 2132
 Newry, Mourne & Down DC.... 0300 013 2233

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