



ISLINGTON

The Effectiveness of Housing Service Communications

REPORT OF THE HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE



**London Borough of Islington
March 2018**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Effectiveness of Housing Service Communications

Aim:

To review the effectiveness of Housing Service communications

Evidence:

The Committee commenced the review in September 2017. Evidence was received from the following sources:

Evidence from council officers:

- Lynn Stratton, Deputy Head of Communication and Change
- Lorenzo Heanue, Group Leader – Productivity and Compliance
- Matt West, Head of Repairs and Maintenance
- Jo Murphy, Service Director – Homes and Communities
- Christine Short, Head of Capital Programming

Evidence from Partner organisations:

- Tom Irvine, Interim Managing Director, Partners for Improvement in Islington

Focus Groups:

- Focus group with local residents
- Focus group with council staff

Documentary Evidence:

- Report: Background information on Housing Communications
- Infographic: Overview of communications channels and audiences for housing
- Table of main housing communications channels
- Website usage statistics
- Findings of the Service Review Group: Learning from and responding to complaints
- Islington Council Brand Handbook
- Report: Online Housing Services (repairs reporting system)

Main Findings:

The Committee welcomed the communications guidance produced by the corporate Communications team, as well as the range of training courses available. However, the Committee noted that housing service communications did not always meet the council's agreed standards.

The Committee considered complaints management processes. The majority of housing complaints were related to repairs and issues not being resolved to the satisfaction of residents. The Committee considers that more robust quality monitoring processes are required to achieve consistently good quality and joined up communication with residents across housing services. It is suggested that greater management involvement in reviewing communications, complaint responses and customer journeys would be beneficial.

The Committee suggests that a regularly updated 'Frequently Asked Questions' section on the council's website would be beneficial to officers, residents, and councillors; this would help to resolve the most common enquiries and assist with directing queries to relevant services.

Residents identified that they would like to receive feedback on the issues they reported, such as estate environmental issues and communal repairs. Residents also expressed frustration with a lack of progress on delayed and complex repairs. It was acknowledged that some processes are lengthy and involve several different teams, however legitimate delays and processes may appear as inaction to residents if they are not provided with regular updates.

Residents suggested that they should be allocated a named case officer when raising repairs, complaints, nuisances, and other matters. It was commented that residents preferred to speak to the same officer and build a relationship with them, rather than deal with a different officer each time.

The Committee considered the importance of joined up working, and supporting staff to communicate with residents effectively. The Committee was impressed with the service ambassador scheme, noting that it had the potential to significantly develop communication between services and improve joined up working at an operational level. The Committee would support the scheme expanding to other areas of the housing service and key partner services such as Adult Social Care.

The Committee was impressed with the online repairs reporting system, and would support further promotion of the system given its effectiveness and potential for financial savings. The Committee also considered that there is scope for further improvements. The Committee would support the development of further online housing services, however, it is also acknowledged that some housing services are not appropriate to migrate entirely online.

The Committee welcomes the transformation work in the Homes and Communities service. The redesigned service will have a stronger emphasis on early intervention, empowerment, resilience and prevention. The Committee would welcome an update after the service redesign is fully implemented.

Conclusions:

The Committee has made 19 recommendations in response to the evidence received. These relate to the quality of communications, communicating the right information to residents, supporting staff and joined up working, and other aspects of housing service communications. It is hoped that these recommendations will assist housing services in providing good services on a tight budget.

The Committee recognises the importance of Housing Communications and may wish to continue to review communications-related matters in future.

The Committee would like to thank the officers who provided evidence to the review. The officers interviewed said that they were motivated to provide a good service to residents and were frustrated when things did not go well. Although the review has partially focused on service failures and complaints, the Committee also suggests that services should promote the positive work they are doing on behalf of residents; when the council provides a good service this should be recognised and communicated. The Committee would also like to thank the residents who contributed to the review by providing relevant casework and their views on housing services. The Executive is asked to endorse the Committee's recommendations.

Recommendations:

Quality of Communications

1. The council should agree a Code of Communications among the council's Housing services, Partners for Improvement in Islington, and contractors. This should set out agreed principles for effective communication, and should seek to ensure consistent quality in communication with residents. The Code should cover issues such as responsiveness, accessibility, tone of voice, joined up working and record keeping. Tenant Management Organisations and Housing Associations should be encouraged to adopt a similar code, if they have not done so already.
2. Processes for Housing management to review the quality of staff communications, complaint responses and customer journeys should be enhanced. Communications and complaints should be reviewed on a regular basis, with clear procedures for how quality will be monitored, how these can be escalated for management review, and how this will inform officer training and development and internal processes.
3. All front-facing housing staff should have an objective in their appraisal related to providing high quality customer services and communication. Progress against this objective should be regularly reviewed in one-to-one meetings with management.

Communicating the right information to residents

4. Digital notice boards on estates should be developed further to include more localised content. It is suggested that residents' associations and other groups be consulted on the information these notice boards should display.
5. A 'Frequently Asked Questions' section should be added to the Housing section of the council's website. This would help to signpost residents and officers to relevant information and answer the most common queries. It is thought that this would free-up staff time for other issues.
6. Housing services should seek to provide better feedback to residents on issues they report, including estate environmental issues and communal repairs. This could include more direct communication with residents, or "you said, we did" style communications.
7. Housing services should keep residents informed of progress with delayed and complex repairs, and explain any relevant processes and the reasons for delays. The Repairs service should schedule reminders on case files for officers to provide regular updates to residents with unresolved repairs.
8. Housing services should consider the feasibility of allocating named case officers to deal with complex issues. This would ensure consistency in communication and reassure residents that their issue is being dealt with. These officers should be empowered to liaise with other services to secure the best outcome for residents.
9. It is recommended that a booklet is produced after each capital works scheme detailing the works carried out with before and after images and the cost of the scheme. This booklet should be provided to both tenants and leaseholders, and should be available in a range of formats.

10. The mechanism for officers to report out of date information on the council's website should be promoted further in internal communications.

Supporting staff and joined up working

11. The council should use internal communications to raise awareness of communications guidance and relevant training courses. Service managers should encourage their staff to make use of the guidance and training available.
12. The Housing Service Ambassadors should have a key role in encouraging joined up working. It is recommended that the Service Ambassadors scheme be extended to include representatives of all Housing services, and other key services that work in partnership with Housing, such as Adult Social Care.
13. To encourage joined-up working and improve services for residents, staff workshops should be held which focus on how best to resolve specific and complex issues. These workshops should include representation from all relevant housing services and partners, and should consider how internal processes and working arrangements can be improved to ensure the best possible outcome for residents. This would assist in particularly complex matters such as damp and condensation, the repairs access procedure, anti-social behaviour, and other matters that require a coordinated response.
14. Housing services should review their use of CRM, the council's customer record management system. Wider use of the system would assist officers in communicating with residents and assist officers in providing joined up services. It is suggested that interaction with other key systems, such as the repairs management system, would be beneficial.
15. Caretakers and other front line staff should be empowered to report and follow up issues on behalf of residents.

Developing online services

16. The online repairs reporting system should be promoted further to encourage greater usage. It is suggested that the system could be developed further by incorporating the reporting of communal repairs.

Other service developments

17. The Committee welcomes that the Housing Operations service has been redesigned as a Homes and Communities service. The Committee requests that an update be submitted to the Committee in 12 months' time on progress in transforming the service.
18. Better use should be made of mailings to residents, such as the annual rent statement. For example, the reverse side of letters could include information and advice on property maintenance, tenancy management, or promotion of early intervention services. The council should also review the key contact information circulated with the rent statement, as residents commented that they were unsure which teams to contact about different issues.
19. The council should produce a structure chart for housing services detailing key officers and the responsibilities of different teams. This would assist officers and councillors in directing their queries.

MEMBERSHIP OF THE HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 2017/18

Councillors:

Councillor Mick O’Sullivan (Chair)
Councillor Marian Spall (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Alex Diner
Councillor Gary Doolan
Councillor Aysegul Erdogan
Councillor Troy Gallagher
Councillor Osh Gantly
Councillor Mouna Hamitouche MBE

Resident Observers:

Rose Marie McDonald
Dean Donaghey

Substitutes:

Councillor Satnam Gill OBE
Councillor Gary Heather
Councillor Jenny Kay
Councillor Una O’Halloran
Councillor Olly Parker
Councillor Angela Picknell
Councillor Dave Poyser
Councillor Nurullah Turan

Acknowledgements:

The Committee would like to thank all the witnesses who gave evidence to the review.

Officer Support:

Stephen Nash – New Homes and Development Manager.
Jonathan Moore – Senior Democratic Services Officer

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The review commenced in September 2017. The overall aim of the review the effectiveness of Housing Service communications.

The Committee also agreed the following objectives:

- To review the effectiveness of verbal, online and written communication channels; with residents, tenant and resident associations, and internally.
 - To assess if internal processes and staff training are sufficient to achieve effective communication with residents.
 - To review how Housing Services respond to and learn from feedback and complaints.
 - To evaluate the take-up of new electronic communication methods used by the Council's Housing Services, if these have been successfully implemented, and plans for any further 'channel shift'.
 - To review how the council can be assured that the council's contractors and their subcontractors are communicating with residents effectively.
 - To identify areas of good practice and how housing communications could be improved.
- 1.2 In carrying out the review the Committee met with council officers from housing services and the corporate communications team, as well as front line staff and residents in order to get a balanced view.

Local context

- 1.3 Communications channels used by the council's housing services include printed publications such as the quarterly IslingtonLife magazine, the council's website and social media, targeted mailings, consultations, community events, estate notice boards, telephone communication, email correspondence and face to face communication with council officers. There are also internal communications channels for council staff and members, including the intranet and weekly and monthly staff email bulletins.
- 1.4 Islington's Corporate Plan 2015-19 identifies 'providing residents with good services on a tight budget' as a priority. The Corporate Plan also sets out the council's underpinning principles, which include providing people-centred services, rather than systems or process led approaches; and 'making every contact count' to avoid people having to negotiate their way through complex systems.

2. Findings

Quality of Communications

- 2.1 The Committee reviewed the guidance available to staff on how to communicate effectively with residents. Evidence from the corporate Communications team set out the principles that all services should adhere to in their communications: written communication should be simple, clear, and easy to read; communications should provide the right level of detail for the audience; communications should follow the council's brand guidelines; and information should be timely and effectively coordinated.
- 2.2 The Committee welcomed Islington Council's brand guidelines, which were produced by the corporate Communications section. These contained guidance on writing style and the use of plain English, accessibility standards, providing contact details, and commissioning translation

services. This guidance, as well as factsheets on a variety of communications issues, was available from the council's Intranet.

- 2.3 The council's corporate Learning and Development team provided a range of training courses for staff. These included: Make Every Contact Count, on signposting residents to support services; Courageous Conversations, on difficult workplace conversations; Influencing and Persuading; Customer Care Excellence, which covered active listening, body language, and handling conflict; and Write First Time, which focused on written skills and covered structure, tone of voice, grammar, vocabulary and plain English. The Communications team also held themed workshops from time to time; a workshop was recently held on tone of voice and 'nudge' theory.
- 2.4 Major communications such as mail-outs, consultations and website pages were produced jointly by Housing and Communications officers. Communications officers had also worked with housing services to develop their communications; this included drafting template letters and other documents. However, it is not feasible for Communications to oversee the production of all communications produced by housing services.
- 2.5 The Committee welcomed the guidance and training available to staff, noting that it provided comprehensive advice on how to communicate effectively. However, the Committee noted that housing service communications did not always meet the council's agreed standards. Members commented that they had received housing casework which highlighted a lack of coordination, respect and empathy in communications from council staff. A member commented that she worked as a translator for residents and remarked that the tone and attitude of staff was sometimes poor, and this could have a detrimental effect on vulnerable people. The Committee also commented that key messages about housing issues and events were not always communicated effectively. These concerns were reflected in evidence received from residents. Officers advised that resident feedback on housing communications had previously highlighted the need for simplicity and a more empathetic tone.
- 2.6 Although a range of guidance is available to council staff, the Committee expressed concern that council contractors, and their sub-contractors, are not required to follow council communication guidelines. Members also noted inconsistencies between the council's communication standards and those of key partner organisations, including Partners for Improvement in Islington, housing associations, and tenant management organisations. Whilst the Committee recognises that the council only has limited influence over these organisations, a more consistent approach to communication with residents would be welcome. The Committee suggests that a Code of Communication should be established for the council's housing services. This would draw on the council's corporate communications guidance and clearly set out service specific standards on a range of communications and customer service issues.
- 2.7 **It is recommended that the council should agree a Code of Communications among the council's Housing services, Partners for Improvement in Islington, and contractors. This should set out agreed principles for effective communication, and should seek to ensure consistent quality in communication with residents. The Code should cover issues such as responsiveness, accessibility, tone of voice, joined up working and record keeping. Tenant Management Organisations and Housing Associations should be encouraged to adopt a similar code, if they have not done so already.**
- 2.8 The Committee considered complaints management processes. Housing Property Services had its own Customer Service Team which was responsible for investigating complaints and member enquiries in relation to responsive repairs, gas servicing, and mechanical and engineering

matters. The majority of housing complaints were related to repairs and issues not being resolved to the satisfaction of residents.

- 2.9 Officers understood that property repairs was a highly emotive area and staff needed to handle repairs issues sensitively. The residents providing evidence to the review commented that most members of staff were polite and helpful. However, the Committee received some evidence from residents that communications on their repair issues had not been satisfactory, and in particular it was commented that sometimes staff could be more sympathetic to residents' issues. One resident reported that officers had put the phone down on him several times when reporting a repair; another resident provided email correspondence in which she repeatedly asked for an update on her repair, a leak into her flat from a neighbouring property, however no substantial update was provided from July to October 2017. Officers acknowledged that there can be examples of poor service from time to time, and explained that repairs satisfaction was independently monitored by Kwest. It was commented that the number of upheld complaints had reduced in recent years.
- 2.10 The Committee considered how Property Services learn from complaints about inadequate or late repairs. The Customer Services Team record service failures and pass them to the resident liaison manager, who investigates the matter with the relevant service manager. The service manager will agree to actions, and these are then reviewed at a bi-monthly meeting between the Customer Services Team Manager, the Resident Liaison Manager, and relevant service managers and group leaders.
- 2.11 The Committee values the work of the Customer Service Team in processing resident complaints, and appreciates that this work can be challenging and emotionally demanding. However, the Committee considers that more robust quality monitoring processes are required to achieve consistently good quality and joined up communication with residents across housing services. Although senior officers are consulted before major communications are published, it is suggested that greater management involvement in reviewing communications, complaint responses and customer journeys would be beneficial. This would help to identify and resolve process issues which may contribute to poor customer service and communication, particularly in relation to significant service failures, and complex issues which require input from multiple services.
- 2.12 It is important that any changes to management oversight of communication and customer service are clearly communicated to front line staff, with details of how quality will be monitored and how issues will be escalated for management review. The findings of management reviews should be reported to relevant services and corporate Learning and Development as appropriate, to enable any learning to be incorporated into training and internal processes.
- 2.13 **It is recommended that processes for Housing management to review the quality of staff communications, complaint responses and customer journeys should be enhanced. Communications and complaints should be reviewed on a regular basis, with clear procedures for how quality will be monitored, how these can be escalated for management review, and how this will inform officer training and development and internal processes.**
- 2.14 The Committee queried if the content of communications guidance was well known by staff. In response, Communications officers advised that the take up of this guidance was not regularly evaluated. The Committee suggests that awareness of communication guidelines could be assessed through the appraisal process. It is also suggested that all front-facing housing staff

should be appraised on their customer service and communication skills. It is important that staff receive regular feedback on their performance, and that management review their team's performance in this area.

- 2.15 **It is recommended that all front-facing housing staff should have an objective in their appraisal related to providing high quality customer services and communication. Progress against this objective should be regularly reviewed in one-to-one meetings with management.**
- 2.16 The Committee also considered the quality of communications from Partners for Improvement in Islington. Partners tenants received a regular newsletter five times a year, as well as direct mailings on topical issues such as fire safety. All staff received the council's 'Make Every Contact Count' training, and had revised some communications, such as their leaseholder FAQs, following feedback from residents. Ensuring good communication was one of Partners' priorities for 2017/18.
- 2.17 The Committee considered Partners' internal performance data on communications and commented that this did not provide an accurate representation of the organisation's performance. The Committee held an additional meeting in February 2018 to consider Partners overall performance in more detail.
- Communicating the right information to residents
- 2.18 The Committee considered the content of housing service communications. It is important that communications are both of a high quality and communicate relevant and useful information to residents.
- 2.19 The residents who participated in the committee's focus group welcomed the introduction of digital notice boards on estates. The Committee suggests that these could be developed further by including more localised content. For example, information about local community events and public meetings, details of estate maintenance works, and other targeted communications relevant to the estate.
- 2.20 To ensure that communications are relevant to local people, it is suggested that local residents are consulted on the types of information they would like the digital notice boards to display. The council could consult with residents associations, community organisations, local youth groups, and others.
- 2.21 **Digital notice boards on estates should be developed further to include more localised content. It is suggested that residents' associations and other groups be consulted on the information these notice boards should display.**
- 2.22 Members and officers identified that they regularly received queries for the same information. Although it was acknowledged that there is a great deal of information on the council's website, it was reported that both officers and residents could find the website difficult to navigate. The Committee suggests that a regularly updated 'Frequently Asked Questions' section would be beneficial to officers, residents, and councillors; this would help to resolve the most common enquiries and assist with directing queries to relevant services.
- 2.23 **A 'Frequently Asked Questions' section should be added to the Housing section of the council's website. This would help to signpost residents and officers to relevant**

information and answer the most common queries. It is thought that this would free-up staff time for other issues.

- 2.24 Residents identified that they would like to receive feedback on the issues they reported, such as estate environmental issues and communal repairs. Although residents were satisfied that these issues were being resolved once reported to the council, it was commented that receiving feedback would remove any doubt in regards to if issues were being progressed or had been completed. It is also thought that receiving positive feedback may encourage residents to report issues again in future. This feedback could be on a one-to-one basis, such as an email or text message, or could be posted on a notice board or other prominent location if the issue has been raised by a number of residents.
- 2.25 **Housing services should seek to provide better feedback to residents on issues they report, including estate environmental issues and communal repairs. This could include more direct communication with residents, or “you said, we did” style communications.**
- 2.26 Residents expressed frustration with a lack of progress on delayed and complex repairs. Some residents said they did not know if their repair was being progressed or not, or when it might be resolved. Some residents said that they felt exasperated, and were considering giving up on pursuing their repairs issue, even when it related to a significant issue such as a leak into their property. The Committee was concerned that some residents, particularly the most vulnerable, may not feel confident in pursuing repairs issues, and this could result in their repair not being resolved.
- 2.27 The Committee raised these concerns with officers. In response, it was explained that some processes are lengthy and involve several different teams. For example, the Repairs Access Procedure had to be followed when it was necessary to access a property to complete a repair that was causing damage to a neighbouring property. A common example of this was a leak from a property above dripping into a property below. Officers explained that this was not a straightforward issue; only the courts could grant the council entry into a property without the tenant or leaseholder’s permission. The council had to demonstrate that it had repeatedly tried to contact the tenant or leaseholder without response. This was a lengthy process which required liaison between Property Services, Legal Services, third parties, and the courts. The Committee acknowledged that due process had to be followed, however legitimate delays and processes may appear as inaction to residents if they are not made aware of processes and are not provided with regular updates. Residents commented that they would value courtesy calls, and not having to chase issues themselves.
- 2.28 **It is recommended that housing services should keep residents informed of progress with delayed and complex repairs, and explain any relevant processes and the reasons for delays. The Repairs service should schedule reminders on case files for officers to provide regular updates to residents with unresolved repairs.**
- 2.29 Residents suggested that they should be allocated a named case officer when raising repairs, complaints, nuisances, and other matters. It was commented that residents preferred to speak to the same officer and build a relationship with them, rather than deal with a different officer each time. Residents also voiced their frustration with having to repeat themselves by explaining their issue to several different officers. The Committee appreciates that case management systems should allow any officer to access all details about a particular issue, however, this may not be possible if an issue requires cross-service collaboration, and may not capture all relevant details.

- 2.30 **Housing services should consider the feasibility of allocating named case officers to deal with complex issues. This would ensure consistency in communication and reassure residents that their issue is being dealt with. These officers should be empowered to liaise with other services to secure the best outcome for residents.**
- 2.31 The Committee considered examples of communications issued prior to capital works schemes commencing. Members thought that the booklets produced by the council were of good quality and provided helpful information. The Committee suggests that a follow up booklet should be produced after the works are completed with 'before and after' photographs and details of the cost of the scheme. This would be particularly useful to leaseholders for record keeping purposes, and would help to communicate the quality of work being carried out through the capital programme.
- 2.32 **It is recommended that a booklet is produced after each capital works scheme detailing the works carried out with before and after images and the cost of the scheme. This booklet should be provided to both tenants and leaseholders, and should be available in a range of formats.**
- 2.33 Front-line officers expressed frustration with out of date information on the council's website, commenting that this sometimes led residents to have inaccurate expectations of council services. It was suggested that there should be more robust mechanisms for officers to report any inaccuracies or other issues they have. Communications officers advised that website inaccuracies may be raised by completing the form under the 'Was this information helpful?' tab on the council's website, or by emailing the Online Services Team. The Committee suggests that these mechanisms should be promoted further in internal communications, and that officers are encouraged to report out of date or inaccurate information.
- 2.34 **It is recommended that the mechanism for officers to report out of date information on the council's website should be promoted further in internal communications.**

Supporting staff and joined up working

- 2.35 The Committee considered the importance of joined up working, and supporting staff to communicate with residents effectively. Residents identified joined-up working between different services as a priority, commenting that it was frustrating to be given conflicting information from different officers, and having to repeat yourself to different teams. It was also commented that join-up between Housing and Adult Social Services was very important for vulnerable tenants, and these residents needed a consistent approach from the council.
- 2.36 The range of communications-related guidance and training is set out elsewhere in this report. Although some communications-related training courses are mandatory for front-facing housing staff, this varies from service to service. However, as many communications-related training courses are open to all staff, the Committee would support the further promotion of training and guidance in internal communications.
- 2.37 **The council should use internal communications to raise awareness of communications guidance and relevant training courses. Service managers should encourage their staff to make use of the guidance and training available.**

- 2.38 A number of staff members interviewed by the Committee had recently been appointed as 'service ambassadors'. This was a new scheme implemented in the Homes and Communities service to build links between service areas, and to work together to improve services for residents. The ambassador role was voluntary and it was intended to have an ambassador from each relevant service area. The ambassadors had signed up to a charter which set out the values of service ambassadors: this included that homes and communities promote a sense of belonging and wellbeing, that early intervention helps to prevent problems and create better chances for residents, and that ambassadors would work to create better opportunities for residents.
- 2.39 The Committee was impressed with the service ambassador scheme, noting that it had the potential to significantly develop communication between services and improve joined up working at an operational level. The Committee would support the scheme expanding to other areas of the housing service and key partner services such as Adult Social Care. This would help to encourage joined up working beyond housing services, and may further improve services for residents.
- 2.40 **The Housing Service Ambassadors should have a key role in encouraging joined up working. It is recommended that the Service Ambassadors scheme be extended to include representatives of all Housing services, and other key services that work in partnership with Housing, such as Adult Social Care.**
- 2.41 The Committee discussed how services could work closer together with the service ambassadors. The ambassadors suggested that the council could hold staff workshops focused around specific complex issues and have staff from all relevant services attend. This would help to clarify the responsibilities of all officers involved, and the processes that should be followed to ensure a coordinated response. This may result in new solutions to complex issues, and overcome common barriers.
- 2.42 Issues such as damp and condensation, the repairs access procedure, and anti-social behaviour often require input from several different teams. It is thought that an issue-specific focus on joined-up working will help to achieve more effective person-centred services.
- 2.43 **To encourage joined-up working and improve services for residents, staff workshops should be held which focus on how best to resolve specific and complex issues. These workshops should include representation from all relevant housing services and partners, and should consider how internal processes and working arrangements can be improved to ensure the best possible outcome for residents. This would assist in particularly complex matters such as damp and condensation, the repairs access procedure, anti-social behaviour, and other matters that require a coordinated response.**
- 2.44 Officers were aware that residents can be frustrated by having to repeat the same information to different officers. Some officers suggested that this could be improved through an expanded use of CRM, the council's customer record management system. The system allows officers to access information on residents and properties and service requests associated with them. It was acknowledged that the system had limitations, for example it did not integrate with the repairs management system, however it was thought that greater use of the system would assist in joined-up working between services.
- 2.45 **Housing services should review their use of CRM, the council's customer record management system. Wider use of the system would assist officers in communicating**

with residents and assist officers in providing joined up services. It is suggested that interaction with other key systems, such as the repairs management system, would be beneficial.

- 2.46 The Committee noted the key role that caretakers and other front line staff have in communicating with residents. These staff meet with residents on a daily basis and have a good knowledge of their patch and the issues that matter to local people. The Committee would support front line staff being empowered to report and follow up issues on behalf of residents, particularly the most vulnerable.
- 2.47 **Caretakers and other front line staff should be empowered to report and follow up issues on behalf of residents.**

Developing online services

- 2.48 The Committee received evidence on online housing services, in particular the online repairs reporting system. The online repairs system was not intended to replace traditional routes of reporting repairs, but was intended to supplement the existing service. It was thought that reporting repairs online would be preferable to some residents, and the system had the potential to generate savings as it needed significantly less officer resource in comparison to the telephone service. The online repairs reporting system was fully integrated with the repairs management system and did not need officers to input information.
- 2.49 The Committee received a demonstration of the online repairs reporting system. The system was designed to be user friendly and operated on a pictogram basis, which was intended to overcome language barriers and knowledge gaps. The system was fully functional on mobile phones and allowed residents to report non-urgent repairs 24 hours a day, as opposed to the 8am to 8pm telephone service offered by Housing Direct.
- 2.50 Whilst resident feedback on the system has been positive, uptake has been low. It was explained that some council services are entirely online; this includes the council home bidding process, and the school admissions service. However, only around 100 repairs a month are reported online, as opposed to the 4,000 calls the repairs service receives. The council had set a target of achieving £315,000 savings through the system; however, this would require 2,000 repairs a month being reported online, a significant increase in usage. Officers commented that if these savings targets cannot be achieved then there may be an impact on other aspects of the service.
- 2.51 The Committee was impressed with the online repairs reporting system, and would support further promotion of the system given its effectiveness and potential for financial savings. The Committee also considered that there is scope for further improvements. For example, the system is not able to process communal repairs and it is thought that this would be a positive development.
- 2.52 **The online repairs reporting system should be promoted further to encourage greater usage. It is suggested that the system could be developed further by incorporating the reporting of communal repairs.**
- 2.53 The Committee would support the development of further online housing services. It is noted that some residents are not confident in using online services, and the Committee welcomes initiatives such as the council's Digital Champion Scheme, which is training staff to support residents in getting online. However, it is also acknowledged that some housing services are not

appropriate to migrate entirely online, particularly those which provide essential services to vulnerable people.

Other service developments

- 2.54 The Committee received evidence on the refreshed Homes and Communities service, formerly Housing Operations, which included estate services, tenancy services, area housing offices, income collection, concierge services, and the voluntary and community sector team. The service had a renewed focus on developing local communities, supporting health and wellbeing, and supporting residents into employment.
- 2.55 The service redesign will mean that staff will need to work in new and different ways. The stronger emphasis on early intervention, empowerment, resilience and prevention would require staff to have supportive and challenging conversations with residents. Residents could expect to see a greater emphasis on co-designed services, a greater use of online services, and interactions with staff to focus on wellbeing issues as well as core housing functions.
- 2.56 The Committee notes that transformation work in the Homes and Communities service is ongoing and implementation work will take up to 12 months. The Committee supports the new approach of the service, and would welcome a progress update in future.
- 2.57 **The Committee welcomes that the Housing Operations service has been redesigned as a Homes and Communities service. The Committee requests that an update be submitted to the Committee in 12 months' time on progress in transforming the service.**
- 2.58 The Committee supported the council's work to 'make every contact count' and considered if there were unused opportunities to communicate useful information, including wellbeing messages, to residents. It was suggested that better use could be made of large-scale mailings; leaflets could be included in the annual rent statement, and information could be included on the reverse side of letters.
- 2.59 **Better use should be made of mailings to residents, such as the annual rent statement. For example, the reverse side of letters could include information and advice on property maintenance, tenancy management, or promotion of early intervention services. The council should also review the key contact information circulated with the rent statement, as residents commented that they were unsure which teams to contact about different issues.**
- 2.60 The Committee noted that there can be a level of uncertainty among non-housing officers and members in relation to the responsibilities of different teams in the housing service and where enquiries should be directed to. It was suggested that a structure chart should be produced for this purpose.
- 2.61 **The council should produce a structure chart for housing services detailing key officers and the responsibilities of different teams. This would assist officers and councillors in directing their queries.**

3. Conclusions

- 3.1 The Committee has made 19 recommendations in response to the evidence received. These relate to the quality of communications, communicating the right information to residents, supporting staff and joined up working, and other aspects of housing service communications. It is hoped that these recommendations will assist housing services in providing good services on a tight budget.
- 3.2 The Committee recognises the importance of Housing Communications and may wish to continue to review communications-related matters in future.
- 3.3 The Committee would like to thank the officers who provided evidence to the review. The officers interviewed said that they were motivated to provide a good service to residents and were frustrated when things did not go well. Although the review has partially focused on service failures and complaints, the Committee also suggests that services should promote the positive work they are doing on behalf of residents; when the council provides a good service this should be recognised and communicated. The Committee would also like to thank the residents who contributed to the review by providing relevant casework and their views on housing services. The Executive is asked to endorse the Committee's recommendations.

<p align="center">SCRUTINY INITIATION DOCUMENT (SID)</p>
<p>Review: The Effectiveness of Housing Service Communications</p>
<p>Scrutiny Review Committee: Housing Scrutiny Committee</p>
<p>Director leading the review: Maxine Holdsworth, Service Director, Housing Needs and Strategy</p>
<p>Lead officer: Paul Byer, Service Development Manager Lynn Stratton, Deputy Head of Communications and Change</p>
<p>Overall aim: To review the effectiveness of Housing Service communications</p>
<p>Objectives of the review:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To review the effectiveness of verbal, online and written communication channels; with residents, tenant and resident associations, and internally. • To assess if internal processes and staff training are sufficient to achieve effective communication with residents. • To review how Housing Services respond to and learn from feedback and complaints. • To evaluate the take-up of new electronic communication methods used by the Council's Housing Services, if these have been successfully implemented, and plans for any further 'channel shift'. • To review how the council can be assured that the council's contractors and their subcontractors are communicating with residents effectively. • To identify areas of good practice and how housing communications could be improved.
<p>How is the review to be carried out:</p> <p><u>Scope of the review</u></p> <p>The review will focus on:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ensuring the quality of communications <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Internal communications, including communication between departments and with councillors • External communications to residents, including output from third party contractors • External communications to stakeholders such as TRAs • Communication processes – how are letters and other forms of written communication drafted • Staff training – what training is received? • How the quality of Housing Service communications is evaluated • How the service seeks to achieve consistency • Expectations of service communications

2. Feedback, complaints, and resident journeys
 - Examples of common complaints and feedback
 - How Housing Services learn from feedback and complaints
 - How can feedback and complaints processes be improved
 - How can housing services resolve issues to avoid them being escalated
 - Do housing services consider the 'bigger picture' when issues are raised by multiple residents, or are issues considered on an individual basis?
 - What barriers to communication do residents face, and how these can be overcome?
3. The development of Housing Communications
 - How do residents prefer to be communicated with?
 - The effectiveness of new online communications methods (inc. repairs reporting)
 - The reasons for 'channel shift' and the benefits and costs of online services
 - Plans for the further development of online services
 - Can the take-up of online communications channels be encouraged?
 - If staff need additional support in communicating with residents
4. Organisational culture relating to communications

Types of evidence

- The results of previous reviews of communications
- Feedback received through resident surveys and engagement
- Complaints data
- Website data and website performance information
- Structure chart indicating key communication channels
- Examples of communications related complaints and casework
- Evidence from residents on their priorities, preferences, and experiences.
- Evidence from third parties, such as Partners
- Evidence on best practice
- Workshop for members and officers to jointly review how complaints have been handled, as well as other issues. This could take the form of a focus group with frontline staff such as customer services, Housing Direct, caretakers, service ambassadors, repairs operatives, AHO staff, and complaints teams.

Additional information:

In carrying out the review the committee will consider equalities implications and resident impacts identified by witnesses. The Executive is required to have due regard to these, and any other relevant implications, when responding to the review recommendations.

Programme	
Key output:	To be submitted to Committee on:
1. Scrutiny Initiation Document	17 July 2017
2. Draft Recommendations	11 December 2017
3. Final Report	13 March 2018

The Effectiveness of Housing Services Communications – Witness Evidence Plan

Overall aim: To review the effectiveness of Housing Service communications.

Committee Meeting – 4 September 2017		
Who / What	Organisation / Purpose	Other key information
Lynn Stratton, Deputy Head of Communication and Change	To provide the committee with a range of information on Housing Communications which will inform the review.	<p>To include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a summary of previous communications reviews, • a summary of resident priorities, regular feedback and complaints • feedback received on specific communications issues, i.e. from the Housing Disability Panel • details of staff training, • details of how staff are supported in communicating (templates etc) • overview of current range of communications channels used by the service • a structure chart identifying key communications channels • how the quality of communications is evaluated, • What is the housing service's approach to making communications accessible to residents needing different formats? <p>To meet SID objectives:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To review the effectiveness of verbal, online and written communication channels; with residents, tenant and resident associations, and internally.
Lorenzo Heanue, Group Leader - Productivity & Compliance	To look in detail at how feedback and complaints are handled – to focus on the Repairs service as a case study of a front line service which receives a number of complex complaints	<p>To include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Examples of common complaints and feedback • How can feedback and complaints processes be improved • How can housing services resolve issues to avoid them being escalated <p>To meet SID objectives</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To review how Housing Services respond to and learn from feedback and complaints.

Committee Meeting – 3 October 2017

Who / What	Organisation / Purpose	Other key information
Tom Irvine, Deputy Managing Director, Partners for Improvement in Islington	Representative from Partners on how they communicate with residents	To meet objective: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To review how the council can be assured that the council's contractors and their subcontractors are communicating with residents effectively.
Matt West, Head of Repairs and Maintenance	To provide the Committee with an update on the council's online housing services; including performance and accessibility, the effectiveness of online repairs reporting, the reasons for 'channel shift', how channel shift can be encouraged, and plans for the further development of online services.	To include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Web data and website performance information To meet objective: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To evaluate the take-up of new electronic communication methods used by the Council's Housing Services, if these have been successfully implemented, and plans for any further 'channel shift'

Resident Focus Group – 1 November 2017

Members of the Committee to interview residents on their priorities, preferences and experiences of housing communications. Findings of the Focus Group to be reported to the next Committee Meeting	To meet objective: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To review the effectiveness of verbal, online and written communication channels; with residents, tenant and resident associations, and internally.
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Staff Focus Group – 6 November 2017

Members of the Committee to interview staff from a range of front line services – Customer Services, housing Direct, caretakers, service ambassadors, repairs operatives, AHO staff, complaints teams, etc. Findings of the Focus Group to be reported to the next Committee Meeting	To meet objective: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To assess if internal processes and staff training are sufficient to achieve effective communication with residents.
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Committee Meeting – 16 November 2017

Who / What	Organisation / Purpose	Other key information
Jo Murphy, Service Director – Homes and Communities	To provide a strategic insight into Housing Service communications and to respond to any specific issues raised in the course of the review	To include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Principles and expectations of communication Do housing services consider the 'bigger picture' when issues are raised by multiple residents, or are issues considered on an individual basis?
Christine Short, Head of Capital Programming	To provide evidence on how capital works contractors communicate with residents, and how the council could seek to influence this.	To meet objective: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To review how the council can be assured that the council's contractors and their subcontractors are communicating with residents effectively.
Notes of focus groups sessions.	To note the findings of the focus groups held with residents and staff.	

Draft recommendations – 11 December 2017