



Evidence supplied by: The Deputy Head of Communications and Change

Housing Scrutiny Committee	Date: 4 September 2017	Wards: All
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SUBJECT: Housing Communication Scrutiny Review: Witness Evidence Background information on housing communications.

1. Synopsis

- 1.1 This briefing provides the Committee with a range of background information about housing communications, further to the discussion at the 17 July meeting of the Committee.

2. Channels

- 2.1 An infographic and spreadsheet have been produced (see appendices) to indicate the main channels that are used to communicate about the housing service, by different key audience groups. As both documents indicate, the picture is complex and fragmented. The nature and frequency of communication will be different dependent on your tenancy type and management.
- 2.2 The council puts out regular 'broadcast' information such as the housing section in IslingtonLife. There are also direct and universal communications such as service change mailings. But a lot of additional interaction with residents will be at a much more localised and targeted level – and of course our residents' own consumption of our channels – whether printed or online will also vary.
- 2.3 As an organisation we are keen to encourage use of digital channels which also give us the opportunity to target information to residents around their interests. Social media also offers the potential for more informal and localised communication (as well as potential reputational risks). This is an area we are interested in developing.
- 2.4 Different channels are better for communicating certain types of information, or for engaging residents than others. Though we do a lot of communicating there is a gap in our knowledge about the channels residents prefer and there are some options such as SMS that are currently underused.

3. Which issues most concern our residents?

3.1 The Housing Service is complex and it is not always easy to judge which areas of it are most important to residents, but the service monitors its performance and this gives us a few clues.

For example, there is an independent survey of Resident Satisfaction run every two years across all tenures. The results from the latest survey in 2015 indicate that:

- repairs and maintenance are the priority for tenants and homeowners alike – though keeping tenants informed was among the top three concerns for tenants.
- tenants and homeowners are generally happy with their neighbourhoods
- litter and dog fouling are top of the list of anti-social behaviour concerns
- fewer than 50% tenants and homeowners were satisfied with opportunities to take part in management and decision making

The findings of the 2015 Residents Survey were reported to the Housing Scrutiny Committee in January 2016. The information received on resident priorities is set out below.

Service priorities - tenants

2013	%	2015	%
Repairs and Maintenance	65%	Repairs and Maintenance	73%
Keeping tenants informed	42%	Overall quality of home	48%
Overall quality of home	41%	Keeping tenants informed	45%

Service priorities - homeowners

2013	%	2015	%
Repairs and Maintenance	57%	Repairs and Maintenance	65%
Value for Money of Service Charge	53%	Value for Money of Service Charge	60%
Taking homeowners' views into account/ Dealing with anti-social behaviour	37%	Taking homeowners' views into account	41%

Complaints data provides additional clues. As the table below indicates, Complaints about service charges from leaseholders top the table followed by issues with tenancy management, estate services, ASB and income recovery.

3.2 Housing Operations - five service areas with highest level of complaints during 2016-17

Volume of stage 1 complaints by subject area

Subject area	Number of complaints
Service Charges/Leasehold Management	19
Tenancy Management	17
Estate Services	13
Anti-social behaviour	12
Income Recovery	9

3.3 Our web analytics indicate that users of our housing pages overwhelmingly are focused on organising repairs or else finding or bidding for homes. Viewing rent statements online and searches for estate management information are also popular (see Appendix 3 for more detail). If we want to drive engagement these are already useful clues as to the areas we could focus on first.

4. Quality control and evaluation

4.1 Quality control

Most priority external communication put out by the council is jointly managed by the service and Communications teams. Between us we aim to ensure that:

- copy is simple, clear and easy to read
- we are providing the right level of detail for the audience
- that the council's brand guidelines (design and writing style) are followed and that information is presented in an engaging way
- information is timely and, where multiple channels are used, effectively co-ordinated.

In most cases sign off will be required from a Service Head or Director before put anything out. For some priority areas – often where there are sensitivities or reputational issues at stake - the Lead Member will also be consulted. Examples might be consultations or the recent fire safety mailings.

4.2 Evaluation

Qualitative evaluation: Wherever possible we will try to test and evaluate communications - we have run focus group for example to test design ideas/how understandable messages are.

Some communications are easier to monitor than others. For example, consultations will generate offline and online feedback and comment – and will often involve direct engagement. So we can get a feel for both the awareness, quality and quantity of our responses.

We surveyed residents on the Resident Involvement Register in 2013 about 'Your Home' – the quarterly supplement for tenants and leaseholders distributed with IslingtonLife (it has now been fully incorporated to save money on production costs). The feedback was broadly positive – nearly 70% found it useful. The format, language and design were liked. Around 30% of recipients at the time were interested in receiving their copy online. Local and leaseholder news were considered the most useful items while items with a more local focus, more case studies/human interest stories and more resident voices were suggested as areas we could do more of.

When the council's website was overhauled, the housing pages were also user tested with residents and extensively rewritten prior to go live. (The website has since been given the top rating for accessibility and ease of use by SOCITM - which assesses government websites).

The Housing Service Review Group has also been a valuable source of feedback and the results of their recent reviews are summarised in the next section. The consistency in feedback indicates there are some common and ongoing issues for us to be aware of.

However, evaluation isn't always straight forward. The response to communications will often be mediated by other factors and may not be immediate so monitoring effectiveness can be a challenge – and can also create an extra overhead for the service (for example asking additional questions about where people found out information etc).

Quantitative evaluation: We don't monitor general awareness of housing issues on a regular basis. We are able to track consumption of digital media, for example we can run reports on web hits with google analytics. We use an e-marketing system called Dotmailer to create our council corporate e-bulletins and this also gives us information on the numbers who have opened our communications and bulletins, which items they have clicked on as well as bouncebacks (which in turn help to cleanse customer records on the council's customer database). Please note that these functions are not available using regular Outlook emails. Similarly, we can monitor numbers of people who have opened or retweeted our messages, and when, on Twitter using our management system 'social sign in'.

Reputation management: Our media team monitor press coverage and provide a daily report which is emailed to key contacts around the council – and respond where appropriate in consultation with Service Heads, Directors and Executive Members. Comments on Twitter are monitored using a daily rota in Customer Services and Communications in order to help manage our reputation.

5. Feedback from previous reviews carried out by the Housing Service Review Group

5.1 **New build:** Communications was part of the recent review of the new build process and provided a useful steer on a number of areas and we have taken action on most of these points:

Keep things simple:

- Consultation materials should refer to people who have experience of completed schemes
- Avoid over-long documents with too many words and not enough images. Use bullet points
- Avoid technical language
- Give contractors templates and guidance to keep their materials more consistent and accurate

Tone of voice

- Keep letters professional and empathetic
- Customer care and interpersonal skills important for project managers – a training need?

Keep it real!

- Use more images/videos of people inside the new homes rather than external shots
- CGIs or photographs of internal layouts at planning stage including people for scale for boards and website
- Use 3D presentation boards to include a person to help demonstrate the scale of the property
- Refer to people who have experienced other schemes that have now completed
- Make a video on the different stages of a development project.

Feedback and learning

- Carry out a satisfaction survey at the end of each project
- Produce a newsletter outlining learning that will improve the resident experience for future schemes

5.2 **Complaints:** Similar points were identified in a separate Scrutiny report on complaints. Two focus group discussions for example similarly identified plain English; empathetic tone of voice; accessibility; keeping things simple for residents; and feedback (for example publicising resolved complaints through "You said/we did" on the website and Your Home magazine). Other suggestions included, carry out a peer review of a % of complaints with other councils/ section and use the Housing Service Review Group to carry out an annual quality check of a sample of complaint responses.

6. Training and support for housing staff

- 6.1 **Communications toolkit on the intranet:** to help colleagues to 'self serve' the communications team have provided comprehensive and practical guidance which can be found under the 'Staff Essentials' section on the intranet. It includes:
- Word and powerpoint templates: to help colleagues create properly branded and accessible documents including letters, reports, newsletters and presentations.
 - Factsheets giving practical tips on everything from organising an event, putting together an award entry, to creating engaging web copy
 - Copywriting and plain English
 - Accessibility
- 6.2 **Panacea:** this is the council's online print and design management system. It includes a range of basic pre-set templates for posters and flyers that enable non-communications colleagues to produce properly branded and print-ready materials without using a designer. You tap in your copy and can you also pull in images – then press a button and the system will create you a document suitable for professional, high resolution printing. The templates are basic but are suitable for many of smaller distribution and low priority communications that services put out – and are a step up from what can be produced in Word.
- 6.3 **Corporate training:** the council's corporate Learning and Development team provide a range of courses that can assist colleagues with both written and face to face communication. These are not mandatory and in most cases will be agreed between staff and managers as part of the development plan set out as part of the appraisal process. Examples include:
- **Making Every Contact Count:** spotting opportunities in conversations with residents to signpost them to sources of help and support, for example SHINE for housing and energy help; iWork for employment support; and One You Islington for health advice and support. There is both an online and half day workshop option for this course
 - **Courageous conversations:** a half day workshop to help you plan and handle difficult workplace conversations
 - **Influencing and persuading:** a day workshop that teaches you techniques to read others, recognise your own style and maximise your impact.
 - **Customer care excellence:** a day workshop that covers all aspects of good customer service, including active listening, body language and handling conflict and aggressive behaviour.
 - **Write first time:** a day workshop aimed at improving written skills. It covers everything from planning and structure; tone of voice; grammar; vocabulary and plain English
- 6.4 **Bespoke support:** the Communications team provides bespoke support to Housing colleagues on request. In the past we have worked on a review of complaints letters and provided suggested templates and top tips for the team; we reviewed the new build process and provided the new build board with a recommended process for handling consultations and established templates for consultation documents and letters. Most recently we have run a workshop on letter writing that has explored tone of voice and use of 'nudge' theory.

7. Accessibility

Language translations: in line with [council guidelines](#), the housing service provides information in different languages, where appropriate, to provide access to services. The council uses a company called Big Word to provide face to face and telephone interpretation which often find to be the most effective option as it enables the resident to interact. We can provide printed translations as well – though this tends to be rare. The top ten languages requested for telephone and face to face interpreting in 2016 across the council were: Turkish, Somali, Spanish, Portuguese, Bengali, Albanian, Arabic, Tigrinya, Sylheti and Lingala. We include a translation panel on the back of our main corporate publications and we always include a message at the end of our letters to prompt residents to request information if they need it in another language (see sections 6 and 7 of our brand guidelines, Appendix 6).

Written house style – keeping it simple: our guidelines stress the importance of plain language and a positive tone of voice to help make our written communication easy to understand and friendly. Our branding guidelines include a chapter dedicated to our written house style and this is available to all staff on the intranet (see section 8 of our brand guidelines, Appendix 6).

Clear print principles: our design guidelines follow RNIB's accessible design principles. These include use of font style and size; colour contrast and alignment to make our layouts easy on the eye. Our guidelines also include tips on making Word documents more accessible, using photosymbols and EasyRead which is the most appropriate format for people with Learning Disabilities (see sections 4 and 7 of our brand guidelines, Appendix 6).

Online accessibility: our new website has been designed in line with best practice guidance on accessibility. This means the design of the pages can be easily read by screen readers to help people with sight problems to access them. There is a link to accessibility advice in the footer on all pages: <https://www.islington.gov.uk/accessibility> which provides information on setting up your computer to make online information easier to access.

Access for Deaf residents: the council provides British Sign Language and videophone translations and include BSL videos that explain how to request these. Our in-house sign language team also helps to co-ordinate a BSL newsletter to help update on council news (we used this recently to promote fire safety advice) and there is also page for the local Deaf community.

The Housing Disability Panel: the Housing team consults with a panel of disabled residents who give feedback on various aspects of the service. We discussed communications at a recent meeting and received some helpful and practical feedback. This included:

- Considering holding regular drop in sessions for Learning Disabled residents
- Improving disability awareness training (especially for frontline staff)
- Reviewing the translation panel/footer to make it friendlier – perhaps with an offer to talk the letter through with you
- Using a more reassuring tone – and possibly tipping resident off in advance if we are about to send a complicated letter
- Making more use of SMS which is brief and more informal
- Keeping things as short as possible (a large volume of plain English is inaccessible)

The Communications team is working with the Housing service to take these forward.

Appendices

- Appendix 1: Infographic of main housing communications channels (circulated separately)
- Appendix 2: Table of main housing communications channels
- Appendix 3: Website Statistics
- Appendix 4: Service Review Group Recommendations on learning from and responding to complaints
- Appendix 5: Service Review Group Recommendations on communications in the new build process
- Appendix 6: Extracts from the Islington Council Brand Handbook

Background papers:

- None

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