



Report of: Executive Member for Housing and Development

Meeting of:	Date	Ward(s)
Executive	6 September 2018	All

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SUBJECT: Housing Scrutiny Review of the effectiveness of Housing Services communications – Executive Member response

1. Synopsis

- 1.1 On 19th April 2018, the Executive received a report from the Housing Scrutiny Committee about their review of the effectiveness of Housing Services communications. The report highlighted 14 recommendations to improve housing services to vulnerable residents.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 To agree the responses to the recommendations made by the Housing Scrutiny Committee set out in section 4 of this report and to note progress to date
- 2.2 To agree that officers report back on progress the Housing Scrutiny Committee in 12 months' time

3. Background

- 3.1 In September 2017, the Housing Scrutiny Committee started a review looking at the effectiveness of Housing Services communications

- 3.2 The main objectives of the review were:

- 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.

4. Response to recommendations

- 4.1 **Recommendation 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.**

Response – The review highlighted the need for better communication between different parts of Housing and between Housing, Partners for Improvement and contractors.

The council's communication's team provide detailed branding guidelines on the intranet which include advice on plain English, accessibility and various design templates. In addition, the council has clear customer care standards and specific "write first time" training for staff that also incorporates good practice advice.

We will

- Share this existing communications guidance with Tenant Management Organisations, Partners for Improvement and with Housing Associations at quarterly Islington Housing Group meetings. We will also agree a basic protocol for communications between various partners to promote common principles.
- Highlight the need for improved communication at TMO Liaison Committee Meetings.
- Make TMOs aware of the council-run training on communications skills and encourage TMO staff to attend.
- Arrange bespoke training for TMO staff, if required (TMOs are usually responsible for sourcing and running training for their own staff).
- Share communications good practice information with Partners for Improvement and work with them to improve how their staff communicate with residents.

Partners for Improvement are responsible for improving communications in their organisation and run communications training for their staff. They carry out a rolling internal audit of correspondence and complaints handling to drive up standards and produce an annual communications plan.

A recommendation from last year's Scrutiny Review of Services to Vulnerable Residents was to set clear expectations for contractors about working with disabled and vulnerable residents. Housing Property Services are putting together a guidance pack for contractors, which will include service standards covering best practice on communicating with disabled and vulnerable residents; this pack can also be used as a best practice guide for communicating with all residents.

- 4.2 **Recommendation 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.**

Response – All parts of Housing deal with complaints under the Council's corporate complaints policy and are expected to adhere to the corporate standards; although different parts of Housing have varying internal procedures for managing and monitoring complaints in their own service areas.

The Scrutiny Committee received a presentation from Housing Property Services on their complaints handling processes, so there was a focus on repairs complaints. Whilst the number of complaints received in relation to repairs is relatively high, the number is quite small when measured against the

high number of repairs successfully completed. Also, the number of complaints repairs that have been upheld in recent years has reduced.

Satisfaction with the repairs service is monitored independently on a rolling basis by KWEST, a research organisation that specialises housing customer satisfaction surveys.

The committee noted some positive comments about how communications on repairs issues were handled, but also noted individual cases where communication with residents around delayed repairs could have been better.

Complaints received by Homes and Communities have decreased greatly across the years, as have the number of upheld complaints.

We will

- Draw up a Property Services complaints action plan for improvement, focusing on improved communication with residents who complain about repairs.
- Review how Homes and Communities manage and monitor complaints to focus more on learning from complaints outcomes.
- Develop Homes and Communities staff behaviours with a focus on improved communications with residents to better understand their needs and tailor services more effectively.
- Evaluate training to assess if it is making a difference to the way complaints are handled across the department, with a view to re-designing the training, if required.
- Ask the Housing Resident Service Review Group to carry out an audit of complaints responses to get a resident perspective on how complaints handling is improving.

4.3 Recommendation 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.

Response –

We will

- Ensure all front-facing staff have an appropriate objective included in their annual performance appraisal promoting good customer care. The council's new values of being efficient, collaborative and empowering should help facilitate this.

4.4 Recommendation 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

Response – Use of digital notice boards is currently being reviewed. Residents have already commented that they feel messages sometimes move to quickly and need to display for a longer period to enable them to be fully read and that they have a preference for more relevant local, relevant information.

We will

- As part of the review of digital noticeboards, Housing Services will upgrade notice boards to make them more interactive. There are plans to make notice boards touchscreen, which would allow residents to pause messages, or select more tailored information, e.g. services for young people or employment opportunities
- Meet with tenant and leaseholder residents' groups to identify their priorities for digital noticeboards.
- Ensure notice boards better reflect the needs of estate residents.

4.5 Recommendation 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.

Response – A significant number of residents search for on-line information on council services through Google or other search engines rather than going to the council's website directly, so setting up a "Frequently Asked Questions" page on the Council's website may not be the most effective way to help residents access information or help with sign-posting.

The current page structure on the website was organised around the most popular searches (the more popular pages are more prominent). The pages were also user tested. We do need to keep reviewing the pages, to ensure that they remain up to date and relevant. Our housing pages are reviewed at quarterly meetings with the council's Web Team and information is updated to reflect service changes and priorities.

There is also now a mechanism in place for residents who use the website to leave on-line feedback about their experiences. Residents can comment where they have found it difficult to find the information they wanted or where they think information is confusing or missing. This information is then sent to managers to enable them to review the pages in question and make changes, where necessary. Staff can also use this same facility to report out of date or incorrect information on the website. Staff can also access lots of helpful information on the council's intranet including policy and procedure documents and structure charts.

We will

- Involve resident groups in the ongoing website review process in order to check how easily accessible information is and to invite suggestions for how the website could be improved.
- Take note of comments received from residents who use the website to give on-line feedback to ensure housing web pages are providing the information that residents need.

4.6 Recommendation 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.

Response –

We will

- Make better use of digital noticeboards and other communications methods to provide feedback to residents on the progress and completion of communal repairs and other local issues.
- Investigate the practicalities of sending out bulk texts or emails to residents in blocks or on estates where communal works have been completed, as a way of keeping residents updated and better informed.

There may be GDPR issues with sending texts or emails to residents about repairs they have not individually raised. This is why this proposal will need more investigation.

4.7 Recommendation 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

Response – The committee commented that some residents had expressed frustration about lack of progress on delayed or complex repairs, but acknowledged that legitimate delays to more complex repairs may appear as inaction to residents as they are not always provided with regular updates.

We will

- Identify the types of complex repairs that can lead to delays in completion, and map out these processes, to enable staff to prioritise contact with affected residents.
- Ask the Housing Management and Repairs Resident Reference Group for their views on how we can communicate more effectively with residents on complex repair issues to see how this can be built more effectively into the project management process.
- Investigate if the repairs IT system can generate “prompts” to staff to remind staff to update residents by email or phone about the progress of their repair to re-assure them that they have not been forgotten about. This would need ICT development.

4.8 **Recommendation 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.**

Response – Partnership working and good collaboration with other services is a key part of the re-design of the Homes and Communities Service. This service is developing enhanced working relationships with colleagues and partners.

Officers are already empowered to liaise with other services across the council and many front line staff have attended Making Every Contact Count (MECC) training, which aims to offer better help and support to residents and improve their quality of life. However, it is appreciated that there is scope for more productive working across different sections and departments. The Head of Homes and Neighbourhood Services will work with colleagues to improve this as part of the new Homes and Communities Service offer

The Housing and Adult Social Services Protocol and Housing and Mental Health Services Protocol are both under review. These documents set the standards that Housing should maintain, when carrying out joint working, to help resolve issues that affect mutual service users. As part of the review, the information sharing arrangements between departments are being reviewed to see if they can be improved. Any changes to these protocols will need to take account of GDPR restrictions and the need to protect sensitive information provided by residents.

We will

- Consider the feasibility of tenancy management staff taking on the role of allocated named case officers to deal with certain complex issues, that would benefit from one officer taking on a coordinating role across all housing services.

4.9 **Recommendation 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.**

Response – Following feedback from the Resident Leasehold Reference Group last year, a booklet was designed to be given to residents before capital works start, laying out the cost, scope and specifications of proposed works. The revised booklet was well received.

There would be cost implications for creating a similar sort of booklet for distribution at the end of each capital works scheme, so Housing will devise other cost-effective options for communicating better with residents on completion of works.

We will

- Find a simple, efficient way of updating residents following completion of capital works through better use of the major works pages on the Council’s website or updating residents by text and email, depending on the level of information they want.

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

Response – As mentioned under the response to recommendation 4.5, there is now a facility on the website to report out of date, inaccurate or missing information by using the “Was this information helpful” tab. This is relatively new development that allows staff and service users to contact the council on-line with queries about web content

Each division in Housing has a Business Manager responsible for working with the Web Team on content and website development.

We will

- Publicise the “Was this information helpful” facility more widely to staff through internal methods such as Core Brief (internal staff bulletin), to ensure officers are aware of this quick and simple way to report any issues they may have with information on the website.

4.11 **Recommendation 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.**

Response – There is a wide variety of communications related training available to staff, e.g.

- Write First Time – writing skills training
- Courageous Conversations
- Confident Communication
- Customer Care
- Effective Complaints Handling
- Dealing with Persistent Complaints
- Customer Service Excellence
- Negotiation Skills.

A quarterly Learning and Development Training Events calendar of training opportunities is emailed to all HASS staff on a quarterly basis and there is guidance on communications good practice available on the intranet (see response to recommendation 4.1)

The council will shortly be launching a new Office 365 based intranet, which will include a revised section on communications that should be easier and clearer to use.

We will

- Promote the availability of training courses to staff and encourage them to attend as part of 1-2-1 supervision meetings and appraisals.

4.12 **Recommendation 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.**

Response – Service Ambassadors are a relatively new initiative; currently only based in the Homes and Communities division and are an important part of delivering the new Homes and Communities service offer.

We will

- Make best use of the current Service Ambassadors as a way of engaging with staff and residents to improve service delivery. We will develop this role further to assess how Service Ambassadors can promote improved joint working to help better deal with some of the issues that the committee

highlighted in their recommendations that need a more coordinated response across the whole of Housing. (e.g. repair access for floods and damp and condensation).

- 4.13 **Recommendation 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.**

Response – The Head of Homes and Neighbourhood Services will meet with Assistant Director of Housing Property Services to identify the main areas of complex work that would benefit from more joint working across services.

A customer journey exercise was carried out last year to improve how Housing deals with reports of damp and condensation and this process will be used to help improve the way other complex housing issues are dealt with.

We will

- Identify the sort of joint working that would be most effective when dealing with issues that cross more than one housing service area and need a more coordinated response. This could be case conferences to address individual resident's complex service issues or wider staff workshops to find ways to resolve complex issues more effectively and quickly.
- Ask the Leasehold Reference Group and Housing Management and Repairs Reference Group to consider how complex housing issues are dealt with at future meetings, to ensure we have resident input into improving these how we deal with these areas of work.

- 4.14 **Recommendation 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.**

Response –The Housing Repairs Service IT system (Synthesys), which is used extensively by the Housing Direct team to record and diagnose repairs requests already links with the council's wider CRM system; drawing down relevant customer information and populating the CRM system with summary information about repairs calls

- 4.15 **Recommendation 15 - Caretakers and other front line staff should be empowered to report and follow up issues on behalf of residents**

Response – The development of caretakers to provide a wider role to support residents is already taking place as part of the re-design of the Homes and Communities Service. Caretakers undergo on-going training to allow them to act as the eyes and ears of the Housing Service. Caretakers have recently attended training to help them identify domestic violence.

We will

- Continue to develop caretakers to ensure they have the knowledge and confidence to follow up issues on behalf of residents.
- Develop a new app system for caretakers to report concerns, which will go live later this year. This will allow them communicate with other housing staff more quickly over any issues that come to their attention.

- 4.16 **Recommendation 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**

Response – Housing has aspirations to develop the current on-line repairs system to see if it can be extended to incorporate the recording of communal repairs. This would be dependent on several factors including the ability of the system to deal with communal repairs and the cost of developing the existing system or creating a new one.

In the meantime, there is an on-line form that allows residents to report communal repairs on their estate. Residents can also click on a link on the website that will take them through to a directory of Estates Services staff, so they can check if a communal repair has already been raised and check on its progress.

We will

- Promote the on-line repairs service more widely as part of the council's drive to promote digitised services.

4.17 Recommendation 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.

Response – The Head of Homes and Neighbourhood Services will report back to the Committee in 12 months on the Homes and Communities service transformation.

4.18 Recommendation 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.

Response – In the past, important information has been sent out with rent statements, e.g. promoting home contents insurance for tenants.

We will

- Review (with the Communications Team) what key messages can be sent out with statements in time for the 2019/20 annual rent statements mail out.
- Make better use of Homes and Communities bulk mail outs with a view to including information on letters about other services or support available to residents.

4.19 Recommendation 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

Response – The council's updated intranet and also Yammer should encourage more effective collaboration and information sharing across the council. Structure charts have just been updated on the intranet.

We will

- Ensure that structure charts are updated regularly by twice-yearly reviews of the housing pages on the intranet.

5. Implications

5.1 **Financial implications**

None identified. The expectation is that the responses to the recommendations made by the Housing Scrutiny Committee will be met within existing budgets. If any additional pressures are incurred, management actions will need to be identified to cover them.

5.2 **Legal Implications**

Legal advice and assistance will be provided to the Homes and Communities Division as necessary in respect of the implementation of the recommendations made by the Housing Scrutiny Committee.

5.3 **Environmental Implications**

There are no major environmental implications for the works identified or under consideration as a result of the recommendations made. However, producing post-capital works booklets (recommendation 9) would result in the use of additional paper and printing materials. The alternative proposal of using the website, texts or email would reduce the impact of this work.

5.4 **Resident Impact Assessment**

The council must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, harassment and victimisation, and to advance equality of opportunity, and foster good relations, between those who share a relevant protected characteristic and those who do not share it (section 149 Equality Act 2010). The council has a duty to have due regard to the need to remove or minimise disadvantages, take steps to meet needs, in particular steps to take account of disabled persons' disabilities, and encourage people to participate in public life. The council must have due regard to the need to tackle prejudice and promote understanding.

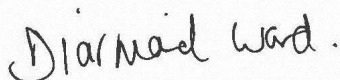
A Resident Impact Assessment (RIA) has not been completed at this stage. Where the proposals in the report may have equalities implications for residents, RIAs will be undertaken. For example, an RIA would be completed as part of consideration of moving more services on-line or making significant changes to a working practice or service

6. **Reason for recommendations**

- 6.1 This report details the Executive Member's response to the recommendations of the Housing Scrutiny Committee and how Housing Services intend to meet the committees' recommendations

Final report clearance:

Signed by:



Executive Member for Housing and Development

Date: 28/8/18

Report Author: Paul Byer, Service Improvement and Involvement Manager
Tel: 020 7527 4005
Email: Paul.Byer@islington.gov.uk

Financial Implications : Shakeel Yasin
Tel: 020 7527 5160
Email: shakeel.yasin@islington.gov.uk

Legal Implication: Marina Lipscomb
Tel: 020 7527 3314
Email: marina.lipscomb@islington.gov.uk