Resident Scrutiny Panel

An Investigation of Redbridge Housing's Written Communication with Residents

Scrutiny Review Report

HOUSINGNEWS

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Contents

Improving Access to services

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CONTENTS

Page No

Chair's Introduction:

The RSP is delighted to submit their second scrutiny review for consideration by Redbridge Housing.

Members of the Panel in discussion with other tenants have heard both good and bad reports about written communication from LBR Housing. The Panel agreed that because of these comments it merits the Scrutiny Panel reviewing the effectiveness of their communication with tenants and leaseholders.

Given that communication is a broad area with many aspects, the Panel agreed that they would not include Redbridge Housing on the internet as part of their investigation.

The panel wishes to say "thank you" for the contribution to all the staff that provided us with the vital information we required. It was apparent to us that individual teams are working hard to respond to their respective areas of communication however, departments are not working together to meet tenants' needs.

It was felt the service needs to be more inter-connected and offer a more joined up approach from the teams.

It is our hope that the outcomes of this review will be shared, with as many residents as possible, utilising a broad range of media as detailed in the Next Steps section of this report.

Background

The Resident Panel (Scrutiny) is made up of residents from each group within Redbridge Housing's new involvement structure, ensuring that the process of scrutiny and resident-led self-regulation provides opportunities to include the views of residents from each area.

The Resident Panel (Scrutiny) aims to find examples of good practise in service delivery along with potential areas of improvement to make recommendations to Senior Officers and Councillors.

Acknowledgements

The Resident Panel (Scrutiny), consisting of:

- Carol Ellison – Chairperson
- Jim Brennan
- Syed Haque
- Keith Barrett
- John Archer
- Glaston Alexander
- Syed A Hussain

would like to thank all staff who contributed to this review, including:

- Staff who engaged in interviews and those who attended the focus group

We would also like to offer specific thanks to:

- All staff within the Resident Engagement Team, for their help and support
- Richard Tomkinson, our independent mentor and trainer

The support, encouragement and expertise provided has been a key factor in our ability to complete this review.

Introduction and Choosing the Topic of Review

The RSP had previous considered a range of information including:

- Performance information including HRA performance indicators report
- Star resident satisfaction survey data 2012
- Local Offers (no performance data)
- Annual report to residents

From which a 'long list' of potential topics for review were developed.

The Panel then considered each potential topic, scoring each service area against the following criteria:

- Showed serious or persistent failure or deterioration in service;
- Low or falling levels of satisfaction.

Panel members then undertook a 3-2-1 priorities setting exercise, which determined a consensus that the Landlord's Communication (Housing) was the second choice for review. Following further discussion, the Panel agreed that this topic was too broad to tackle in a single review and therefore further refined the scope of the Review as detailed in the next section of this report.

Scope of Review

Having undertaken some initial scoping of the review, it was agreed that the main area of focus would be:

- To investigate the quality and effectiveness of written communication used by Redbridge Housing with particular focus on:
  - Notice Boards
  - Tenancy correspondence (Letters i.e. not including leaseholders)
  - Newsletter
  - Email/text messaging

- To consider the impact that written communications have on tenant satisfaction

NB: The RSP took the decision to exclude the website from this review in order to ensure that the scope was manageable. RSP members felt that the website could be subject to separate review at a later date.

Methodology

The RSP planned to use a range of methods to gather information and evidence for the review as follows.

Request for Information

The RSP made a formal 'request for information' to improve their understanding of written communications, which was submitted 16.10.14 and can be seen in Appendix 1.

Desktop Review

The RSP undertook a Desktop Review to consider Redbridge Housing's approach to service delivery and performance. Through the process of review, the RSP were able to establish a number of initial key findings, which were used to inform the design of subsequent reality checks. These included:

1.	The RSP were concerned about costs in respect of Housing News, with the budgetary information that was provided being estimated (with projected spend of £10,000 per edition) rather than actual costs.
2.	Members noted that articles appeared to be very text based and that no design brief is apparent, resulting in a range of colours and font types and sizes in some editions.
3.	Resident profiling information remains low (at around 30%), though the RSP noted that documents supplied detailed intended improvements in this area.
4.	Whilst guidance is provided for email sign-off and out of office messages, examples provided were varied and used a range of different fonts, in contravention to this guidance.
5.	The RSP noted that customer service standards and performance information against agreed standards relates solely to response times and does not include qualitative standards.
6.	The RSP noted that no new leaflets have been produced for two years and that those that are still used are branded 'Redbridge Homes'. The RSP acknowledged the current drive to place as much information as possible onto the website.

Staff Interviews:

Interviews were conducted with key staff members at various levels within Redbridge Housing and in the Corporate Communications Team including:

- Rob Wilson; Housing Communications Officer
- Jaquelyn Adams, Customer Services Manager
- Debbie Hale, Media Officer

Interviews were undertaken by members of the RSP and aimed to address key questions raised during the desk top review.

Staff Focus Group:
This was attended by 8 Redbridge Housing staff from a range of functions including Housing Management, Asset Management, Customer Services Income Recovery and Home Ownership. Staff participating engaged fully in the process and provided useful insight into their current experience.

Visits to Other Providers:
Members undertook a range of visits to other housing providers including:

- London Borough of Newham Housing Office
- London Borough of Barking & Dagenham
- London Borough of Waltham Forest

Additionally, Members undertook observational visits to London Borough of Redbridge's Orchard Housing Office.

Informal Review of Notice Boards
One member undertook an informal review of the notice boards on the 13/03/2015 estate, using a checklist detailing the information that should be available on the notice boards.

Mystery Shopping
Some mystery shopping was undertaken, though not of a significant volume to reach any firm conclusions about the quality of service and information available.

Qwizdom Consultation – Tenants Conference & Leaseholder Conference
RSP Chair, Carol Ellison facilitated consultation sessions at both the annual tenants conference and the leaseholder conference. Specific questions for the purpose of this review included:

- Do you currently use the internet?
    - 73% of tenants and 65% of Leaseholders present use the internet.

- How often would you like the Redbridge Housing News to be published?
    - 41% of tenants and 31% of leaseholders said twice per year.
    - 38% of tenants and 42% of leaseholders said four times per year.

- How would you like to receive Housing News?
    - 77% of tenants and 64% of leaseholders said by post.
    - 10% of tenants and 22% of leaseholders said by an email link to the website
    - 13% of tenants and 14% of leaseholders said in an email.

In addition, the RSP are pleased to note that following its first review into telephone contact with the housing service, 69% of tenants and 63% of leaseholders said that they had noticed call improvement to the Housing Office.

Findings & Recommendations

The RSP members considered all the information provided and sought to identify areas of strength and potential areas for improvement.

NB: We suggest the following timescales for priorities:

High Priority: Commence actions within 3 month.
Medium Priority: Commence within 3-6 months.
Low Priority: Commence actions within 6-9 months.

Strengths

The RSP noted a number of key strengths as follows:

	Strength	Recommendation
1.	All staff members spoken to as part of the review seemed keen to embrace the RSP's idea of including 'resident editorials' in Housing News.	1. Include resident editorials in each future edition of Housing News, enabling a resident to introduce the newsletter, signpost articles of particular interest and provide a focus on local projects of interest. **High Priority**
2.	STAR survey results indicate that residents find the information contained within Housing news is relevant and of interest. Additionally, they indicate that Housing News is a well-read publication. Despite this finding, the RSP were concerned about the overall cost of production for Housing News (at £10,000 per edition) and found articles to be very text heavy. Additionally, there was evidence that production was sometimes reduced to 3 per year to accommodate concerns about	2. The RSP recognise that LB Redbridge will, over a period of time, move away from paper based publications and recommend that initially Housing News be reduced from 4 editions per year to 2 editions, plus an annual report to residents. The RSP feel that this approach will ensure costs remain manageable and controlled, along with affording an opportunity to produce a high quality annual report with potential to encourage significant levels of engagement amongst residents. **High Priority**

	costs. Consultation at the tenants conference and the leaseholders conference indicated that there is a comparable level of support amongst tenants and leaseholders for producing Housing News either twice of four times per year (as is currently the case).	
3.	The intended new 'corporate approach' to Housing News i.e. shorter, punchier articles with visually appealing images is considered to a strength which will address concerns about Housing News being too text heavy and with no clear design brief.	
4.	The RSP fell that it is a strength that the Media Panel members were engaged in discussions to develop the recent STAR survey, including influence over some of the 'optional' questions asked.	
5.	The use of text messaging is a strength, particularly within the income recovery team.	3. The RSP recommend that text messaging be further developed and utilised in other service areas within Housing. a. The RSP recommend further developing systems and approaches to ensure that mobile contact details are routinely gathered and updated, including regular promotion to ensure tenants are made aware of the need to ensure their contact details are kept up to date. **Medium Priority**

6.	The volume of customer data collected by LB Redbridge is considered to be a strength e.g. access survey, STAR surveys etc., though the RSP are concerned at the apparent lack of systems to keep data refreshed and that consequently the data is under-utilised for the use it was intended. The Access survey for example is purported to have collected close to 100% of customer profiling information, but the overall customer profile on Northgate is a lowly 30%.	**Our recommendation in respect of these findings is contained in recommendation 9, below.**

Areas for Improvement
No organisation is perfect, however, and the RP(S) suggest the following areas require improvement:

	Area for Improvement	Recommendations
1.	There appears to be a degree of confusion regarding the role and function of the Media Panel, and the RSP felt that there was scope to expand membership and impact of this resident involvement group. Membership currently numbers 3 residents, and the RSP feel that there is scope to improve on this.	4. The RSP recommend that the Media Panel terms of reference be refreshed and that the opportunity to be involved be promoted and communicated more widely. a. Membership options to include 'Core Group' (the current meetings based Panel), but extended to further include 'Virtual Membership' for those wishing to comment remotely, enabling 'Core Group' members to consider a wider range of residents views prior to them making decisions/recommendations. **Medium Priority**
2.	The RSP found that there was no framework or clear process for awarding the 'resident kitemark' to customer-facing printed material.	5. Rob Wilson (RW) to develop a clear criteria for the Media Panel to award the resident kitemark e.g. plain language, of interest to residents, visually appealing, resident-written content etc. **Medium Priority**
3.	The current editorial and sign-off process for Housing News was found to be convoluted and extremely time-consuming. Additionally, the RSP found strong evidence that the process is not widely understood by staff. The RSP concluded that this could be a contributing factor in the lack of	6. Whilst the RSP feel that the new intended 'corporate approach' will afford some improvements in design and format, the RSP recommend that RW/Corporate Communications Team develop a clear editorial brief for contributors – to be shared across all staff teams. a. Additionally, the RSP recommend the establishment of an

	articles provided by some parts of the Housing Service.	editorial panel with staff representatives from around the housing service to meet once per edition to review the previous edition and plan content and deadlines for the next edition. **High Priority**
4.	Despite the high satisfaction levels reported through the STAR survey, the RSP concluded that Housing News was very 'organisationally focussed' and could benefit from including more resident focussed stories. Members also felt that it was important to consider 'digital shift' when considering recommendations for the future of Housing News. Tenant Conference and Leaseholder Conference quizdom consultation results show a high percentage of tenants and leaseholders using the internet (73% & 65%), but a relatively low appetite for receiving Housing News in any format other than through the post (23% of tenants and 36% of leaseholders would like to receive Housing News by email link to the website or in an email.)	7. The RSP recommend that future editions of Housing News include more resident focussed articles and case studies (including resident involvement activities and impact). **High Priority** 8. As a step change, the RSP recommend that the online edition of Housing News to include interactive features e.g. for booking events, training places etc. a. RW to undertake a series of area based focus groups to inform future resident-focussed approach and wider engagement in Media Panel activities. Results of this qualitative consultation should considered by the Media Panel before implementation. b. Develop a clear database of preferred communication needs including preferred means of receiving Housing News and provide in preferred format. **Medium Priority**

5.	There is clear evidence that LB Redbridge lack the systems to keep collected resident data refreshed. There is, in addition, strong evidence that the data collected is not being effectively utilised for business planning and improvement purposes. There remain issues in respect of Northgate modules and their ability to communicate with each other e.g. an update of contact details within Northgate's Housing Management module would not automatically update in the Rents module.	9. The RSP believe that Customer Relationship Management software, though expensive, could revolutionise the way LB Redbridge communicates with residents and deals with their enquiries. We therefore recommend that as part of the current 'transformation' project, consideration be given to the feasibility of investment in CRM software. a. If, following feasibility study, costs are deemed to be prohibitive, LB Redbridge should urgently develop a solution which ensures that all customer information and contact details are accessed through a single software solution/database.
6.	The RSP noted that no new leaflets have been produced for two years and that those that are still used are branded 'Redbridge Homes'. The RSP acknowledged the current 'Transformation' project, including the drive to place as much information as possible onto the website. The RSP found that other providers were significantly further forward than LB Redbridge in terms of 'digital shift'. LB Newham have no leaflets in printed form, though all are online and support is available to use 3 terminals within the office and access through libraries, including training. LB Barking & Dagenham provide (unprompted) pop-up online advisers who engage in 'live chat' to support users.	10. As a step change, the RSP recommend that all housing leaflets and other tenant information e.g. repairs handbook, tenancy handbook be reviewed and refreshed (design & content) and that the Orchard Housing Office be stocked with attractive PDF cover sheets (in robust plastic casing), signposting the full documents online. a. Additionally, the RSP recommend that 'Transformation' is at all stages informed by tenant consultation and engagement, and supported by an enhanced package of customer training and support e.g. 'get online' sessions etc. **High Priority**

7.	There was evidence of confusion around who's responsibility it is to maintain notice boards, along with a lack of clarity around the information that should and could be placed on them. Observations found much of the information was dated and that some notice boards are incorrectly located, making it unlikely that the information on them would be read by residents.	11. The RSP recommends a full audit of all notice boards along with online resident consultation to establish whether they are used/needed. a. Consultation to be advertised on the notice boards as an additional test of their use b. Reduce the overall number of notice boards and gift some to tenant & resident associations where they are willing to accept responsibility for their management & maintenance (including any insurance liability). **Medium Priority**
8.	The RSP found that customer service standards in terms of response times are the same for both letters and emails. If LB Redbridge is aiming to encourage more customer interactions online then incentivising email/website communications is an important aspect to consider.	12. The RSP recommends that standards in respect of response times to email and website enquiries be shortened to 48hrs, and that systems be put in place to ensure this standard can still be met when staff are unwell or on leave. **Medium Priority**

Next Steps

The RSP commend this report and recommendations to the Senior Management Team of Redbridge Housing and would welcome the opportunity to meet and clarify any of the findings and the recommendations which flow from them.

In accordance with our Terms of Reference, we request a formal response to our recommendations within 28 days of consideration of this report, following agreement of which, the RSP will submit its final report to the Resident's Housing Panel.

The RSP anticipate that this response will include a clear plan of action detailing:

- What actions will be taken
- When the actions should be completed
- Who has responsibility for each action

We would be happy to receive this information contained within additional columns in our tables above.

On-going monitoring, will be undertaken by the Resident's Housing Panel and we anticipate that if successful, this review will deliver:

- Improved level of satisfaction with information received
- Increased engagement of tenants
- Increased awareness of standards and ability to challenge Redbridge Housing to improve and hold them to account if they do not
- Improved performance against standards
- Improved quality and effectiveness of written communications in plain language, delivering improved VFM

The RSP are keen to see the outputs and outcomes of this review shared with residents, and request that a full copy of the report and improvement plan be placed on the Redbridgei website and that staff work with the RSP to develop a summary of recommendations and actions for circulation to all residents through Housing News.

Lessons Learned

Having undergone a steep learning curve during our first review, all members feel more confident in the process of scrutiny. We feel that through working together, our approach is one which will deliver benefits for everyone, both staff and residents.

Meetings are always totally productive and we continue to learn all aspects of resident-led scrutiny together, and feel that we are achieving good results.

We know that our future approach to customer research still needs improving, and we feel that with the support of the Resident Engagement Team, we could involve more residents in the process of scrutiny in the future.

We remain committed to the process and to providing the necessary time to ensure that decisions can be made and acted upon. We work well as a team, empowered by a supportive organisational response to our requests for information and staff time.

We would welcome support in recruiting additional members to join us.

Appendix 1:

LB Redbridge RSP – Request for Information

Service Area to be Reviewed	• Landlord's Communication with Residents (Housing Customer Service)

Objective of Review	• To investigate the quality and effectiveness of written communication used by Redbridge Housing with particular focus on:
	  ○ Notice Boards
	  ○ Web Pages – Housing
	  ○ Tenancy Correspondence (Letters i.e. not including Leaseholders)
	  ○ Newsletter
	  ○ Email/Text
	• To consider the impact that written communications have on tenant satisfaction

Documents Requested (please specify electronic or hard copy and numbers required for each document)	• Last 4 x Newsletter Editions & costs/budget information • Noticeboard Spec/Policy (Guidance Notes) • Selection of standard letters (including Income, ASB & Complaints) • New Tenant welcome pack • Corporate style/branding guidance • Selection of sample email and SMS Text communications including auto-responses • Customer service standards and performance information against standards (past 12 months) • Survey results pertaining to the quality of information e.g. STAR, Newsletter Opinion Survey, Web consultations etc. • Minutes of media panel meetings (past 12 months) • Minutes of staff project group considering web development (last 12 months) • Selection of promotion materials for consultations and events (last 12 months) + attendance and other monitoring information • Selection of customer facing housing service leaflets, policies & procedures & costs/budget information • A selection of samples of translated written

	communications (e.g. letters/leaflets) • Budget information relating to the housing contribution to website and other Corporate communications • Current profile & preferred communication needs information
Date of Request	16.10.14
Date of Completion (two weeks after above)	20/03/2015
Signed (RSP) **Signed (LB Redbridge)**