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| Committee: | Date: |
| Housing Management & Almshouses Sub-Committee | 10 July 2014 |
| Subject: Resident Communications & Engagement Review & draft Strategy | Public |
| Report of: Director of Community & Children's Services | For Decision |

Summary

This report outlines a review of Resident Communications & Engagement which has taken place and the changes which have been implemented as a result. These include:

- The introduction of open meetings for all residents on each estate;
- The publication of new quarterly estate-based newsletters;
- The implementation of a revised process for introductory meetings with new tenants;
- The development of a Housing Users Board (HUB) for more detailed consultation on housing-wide matters.

The report includes a draft Resident Communications & Engagement Strategy for Members to agree in principle.

It also sets out plans for work which will take place during the next year. These mainly focus on developing the use of electronic communication channels, including social media. Instead of having a separate Resident Involvement Plan, these actions have been built into the Housing Service Plan for 2014-15 and new Estate Plans, and will be monitored accordingly.

Recommendation(s)

Members are asked to:

- note the report;
- agree, in principle, the draft Resident Communications & Engagement Strategy which forms Appendix 1 to the report.

Main Report

Background

1. In 2009 the Housing Service appointed a Head of Resident Involvement & Policy to develop and deliver a Resident Involvement (RI) Strategy, covering our communications and engagement with residents. At this time, the City's RI was minimal, and participation was very limited. The RI Team was established, and,

over the following three years, frameworks, policies and guidance were put in place from the centre. The Resident Involvement Strategy and Plan introduced at this time expired in 2013.

2. Whilst some elements of RI will always need to remain centralised, the most effective way of involving residents is to do so on a local level, as most of their interests are related to their own homes and estates. Therefore, our intention in the longer-term was always to move the responsibility for working with residents to estate level.
3. An Estate Management Restructure, implemented in April 2013, laid the foundation for this by increasing the number of Estate Manager posts and building responsibility for RI into their job descriptions. Two senior RI posts were deleted to resource this change, leaving a small central team of one Resident Participation Officer and a Communications Apprentice. This team has been managed by the Strategic Communications Manager as part of a one year secondment.
4. Once the structure had been embedded, the review of Communications & Engagement commenced, with a view to creating a replacement for the Resident Involvement Strategy & Plan. The focus of the review has been to ensure that communication and engagement is done as locally as possible and with the whole community of residents on each estate, rather than through smaller groups.

The Review & Findings

5. A working group of officers was set up to review the existing communications and RI mechanisms used, and to identify improvements needed. The scope of the review was to look only at work with tenants and homeowners of our 11 social housing estates that related to their homes and estates. Work with Barbican residents and consultation on non-housing issues was outside this scope.
6. We mapped the current position using a simplified version of the existing RI pyramid, and divided activity into five headings:
 - **Information**– activities which provide information to residents and do not necessarily require them to respond;
 - **Feedback**– activities which require a response from residents but do not necessarily involve a dialogue, so they can be largely passive;
 - **Engagement**– activities which involve an active dialogue between officers and one or more residents;
 - **Formal Consultation** - activities which we are obliged by law or consider good practice to carry out with residents affected directly by a major project;
 - **Participation**– activities which residents can be heavily involved with and lead themselves, and which contribute in some way to the wellbeing of the estate community.

7. Having mapped the mechanisms currently used, the review concluded that there were many activities in place and some were working well, but also that there were a number of challenges.
8. Work was not well co-ordinated. There was no clear programme, other than for estate walkabouts, and different teams had been sending out information, surveys etc independently. Good work had been done both in the central team and on the estates, but attempts to bring these together had failed.
9. Feedback from residents highlighted that they were overloaded with central information and surveys, but perceived a lack of information on the progress on local matters such as communal repairs, which they found frustrating.
10. There was a lack of skills and capacity at local level to deliver high quality communications and engagement. This meant that the standard of work varied from estate to estate, depending on the skills of individuals. Where there was a skills gap, there also tended to be a lack of awareness and understanding of the value of communicating well and engaging with residents.
11. Enormous effort had been made to improve the engagement with Residents' Associations (RAs), but, though they did valuable work and tried to be representative, most struggled to engage with the wider community. A great deal of consultation work focused on the committees of the five RAs and the bulk of grants were made to them. This meant that a disproportionate amount of time and resources were concentrated on a relatively small number of residents and only some of our estates.
12. There was little use made of social media or electronic communications methods.
13. There were no effective mechanisms for consulting with residents on strategic issues or for them to participate in decision-making. Surveys attracted a very low response rate.
14. Community development work had started in the year before, but was focused on four estates.
15. Having identified these challenges, we then began a detailed review of each of the existing RI mechanisms. In order to make immediate improvements for residents, we decided that we would not wait until the end of the review to implement an action plan, but would make the changes as we went along, implementing, reviewing and improving all the time.
16. The work of the group is dynamic and ongoing, but significant progress has been made.

Achievements to date

17. We have already introduced many measures to address the challenges identified. A detailed list of changes made to date and future plans has been developed and can be provided to Members on request.

18. A regular programme has been introduced for each estate, planned a year ahead and publicised in advance. Calendars have been designed to give residents an 'at a glance' view of the activity for their estates and these will be ready to send to residents as fridge magnets at Christmas. Everything is now co-ordinated, both at estate level and centrally.
19. The programme for each estate includes:
- A quarterly newsletter, produced to a high standard and containing two pages of general items and two local pages;
 - A weekly one-page bulletin update on current estate issues;
 - Quarterly walkabouts, one during the evening, with actions published;
 - Regular estate meetings (4pa on large estates, 2pa on small), open to all residents;
 - An annual Estate Plan, developed using feedback from surveys, estate meetings, complaints and walkabouts is published each year so that residents have a clear and simple way of knowing what improvements are planned for their estate in the coming year.
20. Staff have had training in community development and engagement and in the use of publishing tools. Managers have been trained in facilitation to give them more confidence in their work with residents. Each estate has been provided with equipment needed for running meetings and workshops.
21. Whilst we value residents' associations, and continue to recognise them and to offer support, we no longer rely solely on them to gather views of residents or to pass information to the whole estate. Estate meetings now allow us to communicate with a wider number of residents and consultation is either estate wide, or focuses on residents affected by a particular project, rather than being channelled through any one groups.
22. The grants budget has been devolved to each Estate Manager and a simple application process put in place so that any group or individual on each estate can apply for support for an event or activity to benefit residents. Fairness and transparency is ensured by publishing details of grants in the estate newsletter.
23. We have trialled the use of Facebook and Twitter on two estates and Facebook is now being rolled out across all estates. A project to use the Orchard system to send out group emails and texts has been initiated and we have gathered email addresses and mobile numbers from about 50% of households.
24. Changes to the annual satisfaction survey resulted in a 33% return this year compared to less than 5% in previous years, and has given us extensive data on the views of residents which will inform our improvement work.
25. A database of 100 residents expressing an interest in being more involved is being used to form a consultation network called the HUB (Housing Users Board) for strategic consultation exercises. These might involve detailed questionnaires, one-off forums or time-limited, project specific working groups.

26. Residents are involved in making decisions on estate-improvement budgets.
27. With our new Community Development Officer, we are developing a 4 year programme of activities on all our estates, under the banner 'Remembering Yesterday, Celebrating Today' which will aim to build the capacity of staff and residents to sustain this in the longer term.

Resident Communications & Engagement Strategy & Protocols

28. It is important that our intention and commitments regarding communications and engagement are open and transparent, and that residents have access to these so that they understand the channels open to them. To this end we have drafted a Resident Communications & Engagement Strategy, which is Appendix 1 to this report.
29. The draft strategy includes a protocol for the running of estate meetings and another for working with resident groups. This is to ensure that the approach is clear and applied equally and consistently on all estates. Further protocols will be added for other engagement mechanisms such as the HUB as these are developed.
30. If Members agree the draft strategy in principle, we will apply it immediately, but will publish it as a draft and seek feedback from residents. The final version of the strategy will be brought back to the Housing Management & Almshouses Sub-Committee for signing off once feedback has been considered and incorporated.
31. The strategy will be made available on the City's website and in all Estate Offices. A leaflet explaining how we communicate and engage with residents has been drafted and will be sent to all households and provided to all new tenants in due course.

Next steps

32. Work for the remaining period of the review and improvement programme will include a number of projects.
33. Moving to the increased use of e-mail, texting and social media to communicate with and pass information on to the majority of residents, with provision made for people with no access to these tools.
34. Developing the HUB to be truly representative of our estate communities, using demographic profiling to identify gaps and active recruitment to fill these and then providing training and support to the Board.
35. Publishing the Tenancy Handbook and separate leaflets in a new format.
36. Rolling out the 'Remembering Yesterday, Celebrating Today' programme, developing this and building capacity as we go.

37. Exploring the possibility of a second annual resident forum to supplement the Residents' Celebration Day.
38. Introducing a new complaints policy and procedure.
39. Identifying useful methods for measuring the success of communications and engagement.
40. Reviewing all changes and making improvements as needed.
41. All these measures have been incorporated into the Housing Service Plan for 2014-15. This is an internal plan for the use of officers. The measures will also be incorporated into Estate Plans so that residents can see what is planned. We do not propose to have a separate Resident Involvement Plan as the work is now integrated into the every day work of the Service.

Staffing changes

42. The secondment of the Strategic Communications Manager ends in July and the Projects and Improvements Manager takes over the management of the team and function.
43. The team currently comprises a Resident Participation Officer, whose role is mainly to work with Residents' Associations; a temporary Communications Officer, currently seconded from the Admin team; and a Communications Apprentice.
44. The Resident Participation Officer is taking early retirement. The post will be replaced with a permanent appointment to the Communications Officer post of someone with up to date IT skills so that we can implement the next steps. We also expect to appoint a new apprentice to support this and other work in September.

Consultation

45. Many of the changes made as part of this review have been made in response to feedback from residents. This feedback has been gathered from:
 - The annual satisfaction survey;
 - The STAR survey of tenants and some follow up work with a focus group;
 - Comments made during meetings, walkabouts and one to one meetings with residents;
 - Comments made as part of complaints.
46. Other changes have been made for practical reasons to reflect the move of staffing resources from the central team to the estates. We have not consulted on these changes as they are operational matters.
47. Some Residents' Associations have expressed concern that we will be engaging directly with the wider community rather than through them. We have reassured them that they will continue to be able to submit group responses to consultation.

48. There have also been some concerns about community funding being open to all resident groups and individuals rather than just Residents' Associations. We have reassured the RAs that they can still submit applications for grants to help with their activities and that we will work with them to help reduce their costs so that more funding is available for the rest of the estate. We are particularly grateful to the committee of Golden Lane Estate Residents' Association, who have helped us design the forms and process for grant applications.
49. The Comptroller and the Public Relations Office have been consulted on the contents of this report.

Appendices

Appendix 1 Draft Resident Communications & Engagement Strategy & Protocols
Appendix 2 Detailed review and actions (available on request)

Jacquie Campbell

Head of Housing Management

T: 020 7332 3785

E: Jacquie.campbell@cityoflondon.gov.uk