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| <b>Committee</b>  | <b>Date:</b>           |
| Housing Management & Almshouses Sub Committee                             | 14 July 2015           |
| <b>Subject:</b><br>Resident Communications & Engagement Strategy - Update | <b>Public</b>          |
| <b>Report of:</b><br>Director of Community & Children's Services          | <b>For Information</b> |

### Summary

In July 2014, Members of your Sub-Committee approved a new Resident Communications & Engagement Strategy for the City's housing estates. The strategy included an action plan. This report provides Members with an update on the action plan and some feedback in respect of improvements which have been achieved.

The actions identified in the plan have, for the most part, been delivered. Notable achievements have been:

- Establishing the use of social media as an additional communication channel with residents on every estate;
- Publication of a new Tenancy Handbook;
- The establishment of the Housing User Board (HUB) for more in depth consultation;
- The development of some resident groups into positive and proactive development leads for their community.

There is outstanding work to do in making greater use of technology to improve communications and engagement further. This will be addressed within the next six months through a series of system enhancements which have been commissioned.

### Recommendation

Members are asked to note the report.

### Main Report

#### Background

1. In July 2014, the Housing Management & Almshouses Sub-Committee received a report which set out the findings of a review of the way in which officers communicated and engaged with residents of the City's social housing estates. This review was accompanied by a Resident Communications & Engagement Strategy, which was approved by the Sub-Committee.
2. The review identified a number of challenges for officers and areas where improvements had been identified. Although a number of actions had already been taken to address these, the Strategy set out the broad approach to

communication and engagement, and an accompanying action plan identified exactly what was to be done next.

3. This report sets out what has been achieved in the last year, explains where there have been issues which have slowed progress and identifies what remains to be done.

## **Achievements**

4. There has been significant progress made on all the activities identified in the action plan.
5. We use four categories to describe our communication and engagement activities. These are:
  - **Information** – activities which provide information to residents and do not necessarily require them to respond (eg newsletters);
  - **Feedback** – activities which require a response from residents but do not necessarily involve a dialogue, so the resident role is largely passive (eg surveys);
  - **Engagement** – activities which involve an active dialogue between officers and one or more residents (eg resident meetings);
  - **Participation** – activities which contribute in some way to the wellbeing of the estate and in which residents can be heavily involved and/or lead themselves.
6. Key achievements in terms of **Information** activities in the last year have been:
  - Improvements to quarterly newsletters. Officers have been trained to use publishing and design software and this has allowed higher quality, more attractive newsletters to be produced for each estate. The newsletters take a more consistent approach, for example, all of them including a “You Said, We Did” feature, which lets residents know how their views have been listened to and acted upon.
  - Weekly bulletins have also been improved, using feedback from residents to make sure that the information they contain is what residents want to know about. These have become a normal feature on our estates and residents are used to looking out for them.
  - Every estate now has a Facebook page. Staff are using these in two ways. First, to complement the provision of notices and estate-wide letters by publishing them on Facebook as well as providing them in paper format – this allows residents who might not look at paper-based notices to receive them direct via their smart phones, tablets etc. Secondly, as a quick way of letting residents know about immediate issues, such as a lift breakdown. We are finding that use of the Facebook pages is growing, especially where they have been established for some time, and they have become part of normal communication channels for staff.
  - The Tenancy Handbook, which is given to all new tenants has been completely revised, along with all the other information leaflets we produce. Rather than being a separate publication, the Handbook now consists of a folder containing the Tenancy Agreement, plus a complete range of

information leaflets on different matters. These leaflets are also available in estate offices so that existing residents can pick them up any time. This has cut down on duplication and has ensured that information given to new and existing residents is consistent.

7. Our progress on **Feedback** includes the following achievements:

- A new Complaints Policy was approved by your Sub-Committee in September 2014. It has since been published, and new procedures put in place. A leaflet has been printed and is available for residents. The new process is easier and more straightforward for residents, requiring all complaints to go through a single point of contact so that they can be allocated to the correct investigating officer, that responses can be tracked and that the subject of complaints can be monitored and any trends identified.
- The annual satisfaction survey has been reviewed and brought more closely into line with the national STAR survey, carried out every 2-3 years. This means we can have greater consistency in our performance monitoring and reporting. We have changed the time of year for the survey to June, rather than January, as this fits better with the timetable for creating Estate Plans and allows the feedback from surveys to be analysed in detail and incorporated in the plans.

8. Perhaps the most significant progress has been made in the area of **Engagement**:

- An annual calendar was produced for each estate for the first time in December 2014, and distributed to all households. This gives dates of resident meetings, walkabouts and other planned events on the estate for the whole year, giving residents information well in advance and allowing them to plan for what they wish to attend.
- Resident Meetings have become an established part of estate management work and residents have become used to attending them. The meetings are generally very well-attended and are an opportunity for residents to receive information, ask questions, raise issues and challenge officers on the running of the estate. Allocated Members who sometimes chair the meetings will attest that residents can be feisty, but officers nevertheless welcome the chance to engage directly with the residents. Meetings at Middlesex Street and Golden Lane estates are now routinely filmed by staff and the films made available through YouTube. Agendas are developed according to current issues on each estate, and we include external speakers, such as staff from the home local authority, where possible.
- The Housing User Board (HUB) has proved to be very successful. It currently comprises 78 members from all our estates, who are prepared to give their time to comment on policies and to complete more detailed surveys than we would normally ask residents to do. In return, they receive time credits. So far, HUB members have worked on the Complaints Policy and the Rents & Tenancy Policy and have completed a survey on communication channels. They will shortly be testing our new web-based self-service facilities. We have been delighted with the quality of the feedback and comments, which have been very valuable – most HUB members give thoughtful and measured

responses, and we have made changes to documents as a result of their input.

9. On **Participation**, there has also been extremely good progress:

- A Community Grants Fund has been established on each estate and individuals and groups are invited to bid for financial support for activities which benefit the estate. The application process has been reviewed and simplified, and grants are being given on all estates for a variety of uses, including
  - The routine running of resident groups;
  - Estate fun days;
  - A Wellbeing event;
  - Christmas and Halloween parties;
  - A children's craft club;
  - A community choir;
  - Gardening projects.
- The *Remembering Yesterday, Celebrating Today* programme has been reported in detail to the Sub-Committee – this has been, and continues to be an immensely successful programme of events and activities which commemorate the centenary of World War One, celebrate the nature of our estates today and bring residents together to build and sustain a strong sense of community and help them feel positive about where they live.
- We no longer regard resident groups as representative of all residents, nor do we use them as a principle channel of information – we use Resident Meetings, estate-wide surveys and other methods to achieve these. However, we do value our resident groups for the positive impact they can have and continue to support them in a number of ways, including the provision of grant funding for activities and meeting places. We have also encouraged, where possible, groups to take a proactive and positive approach to strengthening their community.

This has been particularly successful at Avondale, where we have supported the development of the Avondale Community Events group (ACE). Sitting alongside the existing Residents' Association, this group of residents has grown in confidence as their activities have increased. They have run an extraordinary number of successful events, involving a wide range of residents. They are inclusive, positive, and engage with residents in a way which makes everyone feel comfortable, as well as working closely with estate staff in a very constructive way. As their skills and experience have increased, they have also made successful bids for external funding, bringing more benefits to their estate, such as the Edible Avondale project, which helps residents to work together to grow vegetables that they share. We are extremely proud of this group, particularly as they won a Housing Heroes award for their work from the London Borough of Southwark this year and, along with the Avondale staff team, won a remarkable 10 out of 17 awards for community development from the South Bermondsey Partnership.

- Another group which has expanded its remit and become a very positive force on their estate is the Golden Lane Gardeners Group. This group has been supported to extend beyond the growing of vegetables on their own small allotments on the estate to develop a range of activities. They have run various events on the estate, including composting workshops, and now undertake to look after balcony plants, small gardens and window boxes on behalf of residents who cannot manage this themselves. The group is fast becoming a central point for volunteers on the estate and are taking on the running of the Good Neighbour Scheme, making it a truly community-based initiative.
- We believe that these groups provide an excellent model for resident groups and would like to encourage other estates to develop along similar lines.

### **Improvements now needed**

10. Whilst we are proud to have moved our resident communications and engagement a long way forward in the last year, there have also been areas where we have been able to make less progress. These are all related to IT developments and include:

- The delivery of newsletters, bulletins, updates, the Annual Report and other information to whole estates via bulk email ;
- The carrying out of the annual satisfaction survey electronically;
- The implementation of web-based self-service facilities for residents so that they can check and change their contact details, check rent accounts, pay rent and report and track repairs on-line;
- Improvements to the Housing pages on the corporate website.

11. For a variety of reasons, principally a lack of knowledge and capacity within Housing and competing priorities for colleagues in IS, we have not been able to deliver these improvements in the last year. However, in recent months we have invested in a review of our use of IT and in enhancements to improve our systems. We have created a new post to manage our Information Systems and, with the support of IS and our system provider, Orchard, are now implementing a range of improvements. By September we will have implemented a new package which will allow us to send bulk emails and text messages to residents. We launch our Self-service facility for residents in October 2015. Although the satisfaction survey for 2015 was done in paper format, the 2016 survey will be electronic, and we are now working with colleagues in the Public Relations Office to improve our web pages and make these more user-friendly.

12. These changes will give us faster and more effective ways of connecting with our residents and, along with increased use of social media will, we hope, allow us to reach a wider audience. The changes will also save the considerable amount of time spent by staff on delivering information, and allow this to be redirected to cleaning and others tasks to reflect resident wishes or, indeed, to be translated into financial savings. We are, however, acutely aware that these channels do

not suit some of our older residents (although we have many 'silver-surfers') and will continue to make information available in paper format for those who need it.

## **Next Steps**

13. During the next few months we will be focusing effort on making the improvements outlined in paragraph 11. Our other priority will be to develop the HUB and to make sure its membership includes representation from all estates and reflects the diversity of our communities. This may require proactive recruitment of, for example, younger people or particular cultural groups. We would then like to provide training opportunities for HUB members to develop their skills and encourage even greater participation.
14. In addition, we will be working closely with colleagues in Property Services and the City Surveyor's Department on programmes of consultation relating to our major projects. The ambitious programme of work will require extensive and effective communications and consultation and we will build on the improvements made so far, lessons we have learned and the feedback from residents to improve this as we go forward.

## **Appendices**

- None

## **Background Papers**

Resident Communications & Engagement Review – Report to the Housing Management & Almshouses Sub-Committee, 10 July 2014

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