

Committee(s)	Dated:
Residents' Consultation Committee (for decision) Barbican Residential Committee (for information)	20/09/22 30/9/22
Subject: Communications Strategy and Service Charges	Public
Which outcomes in the City Corporation's Corporate Plan does this proposal aim to impact directly?	
Does this proposal require extra revenue and/or capital spending?	N
If so, how much?	£
What is the source of Funding?	
Has this Funding Source been agreed with the Chamberlain's Department?	N
Report of: Andrew Carter Director of Community and Children's Services	For Decision
Report author: Rosalind Ugwu, Community and Children's Services	

Summary

The RCC and numerous residents have raised complaints regarding the recent dispatch of service charge accounts and the failure to provide timely notifications of the large variances in service charge expenditure.

The report seeks to provide an explanation for the overspends and why early warning signals had not been providing for those surcharges.

Finally providing a proposal for the provision of a communications strategy for the Barbican Estate

Provide clarification on roles and responsibilities regarding the provision of budgets and expenditure controls

Recommendation

Members are asked to delegate authority to the Service Level Agreement Working Party to agree a draft Barbican Communications Strategy.

Main Report

Background

The service charge information has been sent out as soon practicable, and earlier than usual, so that all leaseholders were informed of the large increase in costs for several blocks. Usually, this information is not sent to leaseholders until the end of August or beginning of September in readiness for the service charge bill which is payable by 29 September.

The Barbican Estate Office (BEO) accept that the current communications strategy is outdated and no longer adequately serves resident expectations or responds effectively to the fast paced and complex environment in which we operate.

The current large variances on 2020/2021 service charge accounts are due to an increase in the cost of repairs and maintenance and heating.

The increase in expenditure on repairs and maintenance varies across each individual block but is mostly related to increased expenditure for exterior repairs including window replacements, barrel vault roofs and flat roof repairs. Also, because of the difficult access to some of these areas, scaffolding was required.

Annex 1 shows a comparison of the exterior repairs and maintenance charges for 2016/17 to 2021/22 for each block. It demonstrates the significant increase in costs in 2021/22.

Regarding the heating, the RCC and residents have been made aware, there have been significant increases to the unit costs of electricity for the underfloor heating. The disparity in costings across the estate has been raised with the energy supplier, arrangements have been made to check all meter readings and we will report on the findings at a future meeting.

Proposals

- The co-design of a communications strategy through the Service Level Agreement Working Party (SLAWP), which seeks to exploit every opportunity currently available and generate new ideas in better addressing resident communications requirements and demonstrating transparency and accountability.
- Proposed improvements:
 - The weekly News Bulletin and House Group meetings are the main communication routes for local information but is not providing the impact of repairs and maintenance works on individual service charge costs. We need to agree what and how this information should be communicated
 - BEO and SLAWP to conduct a communication survey to ascertain satisfaction with current and establishing 'what matters to residents?' in terms of all Barbican communications. Considering the various types, purpose, methods, and governance routes to disseminate the information. Ranging from lift maintenance, car park closures to anticipated cumulative spend on non-section 20 works
 - Consideration of a new House Group News Bulletin providing articles specific to the various blocks, including non-Section 20 works detailing anticipated works, extent and impact of works, schedules, and costs.
 - Annual service charge meetings, or webinars, to provide information to residents such as 'Your service charge explained' including, lease obligations, Barbican service charge accounting processes and specific house groups information.

- BEO working more collaboratively with internal departments and contractors to obtain timely information for dissemination to residents
- Ensuring the review of the BEO embraces a culture of learning, continuous improvement, adopting principles of accountability, transparency, and value for money.
- Review of KPIs to improve accountability, particularly regarding expenditure and resident scrutiny and decision making.
- Include customer service and communications in the annual training plan.

The communications plan will include a published and agreed calendar aligned to the service charge and committee timelines, to mitigate against the same situation re-occurring in the future.

Annex 2 provides a Barbican Consultation Proposals produced June 2014 in collaboration with the Barbican Association and Town Clerks, called 'A Guide to Consulting on Schemes in and around the Barbican Estate' which illustrates the current communications approach.

Conclusion

Communications can be a challenging discipline, with the service charge accounting process adding further complexity. However, agreeing what, how and when in a communications strategy should address and manage resident expectations and provide clear roles and responsibilities to those accountable for delivering messages.

Annex 1 - Comparison of the exterior repairs and maintenance charges

Annex 2 - 'A Guide to Consulting on Schemes in and around the Barbican Estate'

Background Papers

None

Corporate & Strategic Implications Key Data

Strategic implications –

Financial implications – None.

Resource implications - None

Legal implications - None

Risk implications - None

Equalities implications – None

Climate implications - None

Security implications - None

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