Croydon Housing Scrutiny Panel

Scrutiny of written communication from the housing service.

November 2016

Croydon Housing Scrutiny Panel: Yaw Boateng, Guy Pile-Grey, Rosie Burke, Juliet Motley-Wilcock, Margaret Ashmead, Colin Wood

Section		Page

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 In April 2012 the social housing regulator, the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA), introduced revisions to its regulatory standards. There is now a greater emphasis on local mechanisms to involve tenants in scrutinising landlord performance and resolving problems with housing services. The regulations state that *"tenants should have the ability to scrutinise their provider's performance, identify areas for improvement and influence future delivery"*

1.2 In response to these regulations Croydon Council, in partnership with its tenants developed a framework for tenant scrutiny. This included the establishment of and recruitment to, a tenant scrutiny panel. During early 2012 the panel members received a range of training to prepare them to conduct effective scrutiny exercises and there is a programme of on-going training to enhance skills and knowledge.

1.3 During the course of each of the four previous scrutiny exercises, concerns were identified around the quality and accessibility of communication between the housing service and tenants and leaseholders. In particular, poor quality and complex wording were common faults in leaflets and printed information. Poor access and navigation to information on the website was also raised in many instances. The Panel therefore agreed to carry out an exercise focussing on communication across all housing management service areas, to identify common issues and concerns and work towards identifying possible resolutions.

.

1.4 At a meeting in October 2015, the Panel agreed that it was impractical to consider the full range of communications in a single exercise; i.e. individual letters, emails, website, printed material etc. The panel agreed that the exercise would therefore focus on printed material, such as leaflets, newsletters; information provided on the website and generic emails or other electronic communication providing information (i.e. not individual responses). The panel also felt that the exercise should be limited to only consider communication regarding the housing management service and not include areas such as housing allocations, housing advice etc.

1.5 The Panel decided to assess the various items or types of communication against seven key areas of enquiry, as shown below.

- What services are promoted and what information is provided?

- How effective is it? How accurate is it? Does it achieve what it should?

- Is it relevant and honest? Is the information balanced?

- How accessible is it? Is the information easy to find and is it available in a format that suits a range of customers?

- How clear and comprehensive is it, particularly from a service users perspective? Is it easy to read and understand?

- Does the organisation consult with service users about this communication?

- Are service users satisfied with it?

1.6   The Panel also agreed they would need to consider other general issues as part of this exercise, in particular, the impact of various corporate led policies and practices, on the communications that the council produces for residents, such as the media relations team, the corporate design and web teams, etc.

- What staff are responsible for producing the various items of communication? What are the policies, processes and procedures governing communication?

- Does the way the council develop and produce communication represent value for money?

1.7   In addition, where relevant and possible, the Panel undertook to benchmark the various types of communication and the way this service area is managed against other housing providers.

1.8   During the period of this review, membership of the Panel has reduced and whilst new members have come forward, some of these have then left, while some of those who remain have limited experience. This lack of continuity has resulted in the scrutiny taking longer than previous exercises.

1.9   This report details the findings and recommendations of this scrutiny exercise, which took place between October 2015 and November 2016.

2.   SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

2.1   As part of their investigations, the Panel met with the following:

- Chris Stock, Resident Involvement and Scrutiny Manager.
- Hayley Lewis, Head of customer communications and engagement.
- Sandra O'Connor, Resident liaison officer.
- Julie Pedrotti, Performance and information officer

2.2   The Panel were provided with a variety of background information relevant to communication, including relevant procedures, financial information, staffing structures and job descriptions.

2.3   Throughout the exercise, the panel were presented with, or found for themselves, a wide range of leaflets and other printed material. In addition those members with access, spent a considerable amount of time looking at the housing service pages of the council website.

2.4   A focus group session was held with residents. Around 20 residents attended who were split into two groups, with one group looking at web based information and the other looking at some of the printed material.

2.5   A limited amount of benchmarking with other social landlords was undertaken, by way of looking at similar information provided by those landlords in printed format and online.

2.6   Email enquiries were sent to a variety of other officers to gain clarity or further information about particular issues, processes, etc.

3   FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS

3.1.0   What services are promoted and what information is provided?

3.1.1   The Panel found that a wide range of information is available in both printed and online format and due to time and resource constraints members were only able to look at a limited selection of material. However, at an early stage it became apparent that the council as a whole appeared to be working towards providing a higher proportion of information online and reducing the amount of printed communication.

3.1.2   The Panel looked at printed versions of a range of detailed booklets and magazines, including the following:
- Conditions of tenancy booklet
- Open House Magazine
- Neighbourhood voice instruction guide
- The repairs manual

3.1.3   The Panel also looked at various printed leaflets, application forms, etc., relating to a broad range of subjects, ranging from
- Recruitment leaflet for Neighbourhood voice
- Financial and benefits advice
- Flyers promoting events
- Housing ID registration form
- Caretaking service schedules
- Damp and condensation
- Neighbourhood safety team
- Carbon monoxide
- Contents insurance
- Housing fraud

3.1.4   As noted previously, the Panel also looked at the huge range of information on the website, where they found electronic versions of most of the above, along with a wealth of other more detailed information covering the full range of housing management services.

3.1.5   The website provided access to a range of online forms to report issues, or enabling residents to register or apply for some services and other activities. In addition there was a lot of additional information such as procedures, contact details and other general advice, to supplement the information available in printed form.

3.1.6   However, it was noted that access to a number of services and some other general information, was only available online. For instance the Panel were unable to locate any printed information about the availability of garages and how to rent these, whilst there was a full page of information online.

3.1.7   There is no information available on the web regarding planned maintenance service or the stock investment programme and the Panel were unaware of any leaflets or other paper based information informing people of the process used to identify or carry out planned improvements for tenants such as that provided in relation to such works for leaseholders. Both Wandsworth and Kingston have a separate webpage with general information about planned maintenance or major works with links to more detailed listings by street / block showing when certain works are due.

Recommendations

1.1   (3.1.1) That service managers ensure access is provided to printed information, in addition to that on the website, particularly regarding issues and information that is of interest or value to those groups of people who are known to be less likely to have access to the internet or a computer.

1.2   (3.1.7) That heads of service ensure there is sufficient information available, either on the website or in written form, or both if appropriate, about all areas of the housing service. Where there are legal or financial reasons why a service cannot provide access to such information, that a brief explanation is provided on the website.

3.2.0   How effective is it? How accurate is it?

3.2.1   This area of enquiry is to broadly determine whether the communication achieves the purpose it was designed for. Does an advice leaflet provide sufficient detail to be of benefit, or is it so detailed that residents would be confused. Is the language and phraseology suitable for the purpose? Is the information up to date and correct?

3.2.2   Many leaflets appear to be designed to promote availability of support or additional services and / or encourage people to take up this support. The Panel found many examples where this overall purpose was met, good examples being the various leaflets regarding financial advice and debt management, and the leaflet 'Paying your major works bill'. In both cases, the leaflets were well designed, provided some basic information and clear advice with a range of contact details and links for further support.

3.2.3   The Panel looked at Open House and other newsletters including the e.news publications that have recently been introduced. The Panel observed that the range and type of information / topics is very broad and therefore these items may have more than one aim. Primarily, these newsletters are used to inform residents of recent successes or provide useful or important information such as

changes to policy etc. However, Open House is also fairly regularly used as a vehicle to promote strategic plans and new initiatives.

3.2.4   In some instances, Panel members felt that some items could achieve more than one aim. An example is the 'Blow the whistle on housing cheats' leaflet which encourages people to inform the council about suspected housing fraud. The Panel felt it was very well put together but there was little about the possible penalties of this type of fraud and the leaflet could also have included some additional wording designed to deter people from committing this sort of offence. Similarly, the 'Direct debit' leaflet could have included some brief information about how to get financial or budgeting advice.

3.2.5   The Panel looked at a number of more complex items of communication, which were more detailed by their nature, needing to inform the reader of their rights and responsibilities (some of which are legally binding). Both versions of the conditions of tenancy (secure and flexible) contained a huge amount of detailed information which the Panel accepted was essential but this was printed in a two tone colour scheme, using two columns per page for most of the text and contained few photos. The web page focussed on a PDF of the same booklet and there were no web links to further advice or information.

3.2.6   The website page 'consulting with leaseholders' about consultation prior to major works was also felt to be too long and did not include any pictures. The Panel felt these factors made such items so uninviting and difficult to read that they may be ignored and therefore not meet the aim of informing residents of their rights.

3.2.7   In addition, it was apparent from other conversations and comments at meetings, that some residents were not familiar with these important documents, or in some cases they were unaware of Tenancy Conditions and the Leaseholders Guide.

3.2.8   The Panel were not able to find a tenancy conditions booklet or similar that was significantly easier to read from any other provider. However, Wrexham council provided a summary document in hard copy and online and both Islington council and Amicus Horizon produced an easy to read summary of the main points of the tenancy agreement online, all of which were felt to be useful.

3.2.9   By comparison, both the Repairs guide and the Leaseholders Guide also contained a large amount of detailed information but this was presented in an easier to read format, using bullet points and clear headings and sub headings. Both had a variety of relevant photos and the repairs guide was printed in full colour. This was felt by the Panel and members of the Focus Group to make these two items more attractive and far more likely to be read.

3.2.10   The primary aim of any website is to provide easy access to a full range of up to date and relevant information and enabling the completion of some transactions. The Panel noted that to do this effectively the website should also be user friendly, easy to navigate around and arranged in a logical format. The council website has received some criticism in the past and in further paragraphs, comments and current views regarding the website are detailed.

3.2.11   It was generally felt that the website was effective as a way of informing residents about a range of information. The returns form the STAR survey 2016 show that

44% of respondents looked on the website for information on benefits, 33% made enquiries about moving home and 27% looking for insurance. In addition, statistics from the councils' web team suggest the number of online transactions is increasing, with a total of 53,300 being carried out in quarter 2 of 2016/17 from 33,600 for the same period in 2015/16. The majority of these are currently related to rents / service charges or housing applications.

3.2.12 The Panel and the members of both focus groups found a significant number of items that were out of date. These included leaflets and forms, (many of which were on the website) showing address details for Taberner and Strand House or the New Addington office. Out of use / old phone numbers and email addresses etc. were also commonly found along with personnel / job titles and team and department names that are not currently used. In addition, some of the items have a publication date shown which was up to 10 years old.

3.2.13 It was acknowledged that in the main residents and Panel members do not have the full breadth of understanding to realistically determine the accuracy of much of the key information such as procedures, general advice etc., either in printed literature or on the website.

3.2.14 However, Panel members felt that where items showed out of date information (e.g. names and numbers referred to above) or showing an old publication date, this did not create confidence that the other information contained in these items was correct, relevant and up to date.

3.2.15. The Panel noticed that the production timetable for Open House was quite lengthy. They met the Resident liaison officer and were informed that each issue is normally programmed to take 3 to 4 months from the editorial meeting until they are printed and delivered. In addition, the Panel were informed that officers do not always submit articles to the editorial team within the published deadlines and late additions or changes to the order of the magazine may cause further delays with production.

3.2.16 The Panel were informed that these delays occasionally cause further problems about what was being included in each issue. The timing of publication was particularly critical in the case of seasonal items or those promoting specific events and activities. In the past, items have had to be removed and replaced at the last minute, where it was not possible to complete production in time. In such cases, the Panel felt the effectivity of the magazine was reduced.

3.2.17 The focus group looking at printed information noted that a lot of the items of information displayed on notice boards on estates and particularly in sheltered housing was out of date and in those boards that were located externally, some items were weathered and faded. The group agreed that items on these boards should be changed and old material removed in order for the board to remain interesting and eye catching.

3.2.18 The Panel spoke to various council staff and were informed there is no-one person or team in charge of all the boards. This means that no-one is responsible for keeping displays up to date or gaining access to the boards which have locks. This was felt to explain why boards in different locations show

different information and for the large amount of out of date information. Panel members were also aware of boards that were in a poor state of repair.

Recommendations

2.1   (3.2.5) That service managers undertake to revise the tenancy conditions document with a view to include some photographs and produce the document in an easier to read layout. In addition to produce an online version with suitable links to further information or support pages.

2.2   (3.2.6) That service managers review the detailed information available to leaseholders on the website to ensure it is in an easy to read format, using bullet points and additional links etc., without losing the legal detail.

2.3   (3.2.7) That service managers arrange for a message to be included on the mailing for the rent or service charge bills (as appropriate) stating that the revised information is available and where it can be found.

2.4   (3.2.8) That service managers undertake to develop easy to read summaries of legal and other more detailed documents such as the tenancy conditions and the leaseholders guide, using brighter design schemes, easy to follow layout, links and bullet points etc.

2.5   (3.2.12-14) That service managers agree to review all information – particularly that held on the website and ensure it is updated, removing out of date documents, contact information and references to procedures that have been replaced etc. In addition that out of date paper based information is withdrawn or replaced as soon as is practicable with up dated versions.

2.6   (3.2.15/16) That a full review of Open House be carried out, to consider the way it is edited and produced with view to significantly reducing production timescales and ensuring the production timetables are enforced to make the magazine more timely and relevant.

2.7   (3.2.17/18) That a review be carried out of the way notice boards are used on estates and in blocks and that a single team take on responsibility for listing boards, maintaining them and ensuring displays are updated regularly.

2.8   (3.2.12-18) That the directors for the housing service instruct all service areas to ensure reviews, as above, are conducted on a rolling basis to ensure that the information provided in print and on the web remains up to date and accurate.

3.3.0   Is it relevant and honest?

3.3.1   The Panel could find very little information in the various leaflets or on the website that was felt to be irrelevant. The items and pages they looked at provided information about topics that were relevant to the housing service. There was little evidence of repetition or information that was not related to the subject and may distract the reader form the subject.

3.3.2   Due to their nature, the newsletters provide a wide range of information, not all of which would be of interest or relevant to all readers. In the same way, the website contains a mass of information, much of which may not be felt to be relevant to all residents until they need to know about something in particular.

3.3.3   None of the leaflets or information on the website that the Panel or the Focus group examined included information that was not generally felt to be honest and open. In the main these items stated the facts and did not attempt to mislead, cover up or manipulate the facts. A number of good examples of this were found, including the 'having work done in or around your home' which stated in the first paragraph the leaflet is designed to help residents "…prepare for the disturbance…" in the case of major works and later acknowledges that "…works can be noisy, dirty and disruptive."

3.3.4   The Panel observed that the language in most of the leaflets and information held on the website is written using objective language with very few facts being exaggerated or the reader being misled by use of subjective language, embellishments or an overuse of abstract adjectives, the information mainly relying on the facts alone.

3.3.5   It was noted by the Panel that a leaflet or other written information can only provide the reader with the facts as they are known. For example, where the delivery of a service did not meet the description shown on the website, these issues may relate to poor service delivery and not due to an inaccuracy in the leaflet. The Repairs Guide makes a reference to the length of time various repairs should take but qualifies the fact by stating clearly these are 'targets' which 'should' be met.

3.3.6   However, Panel members also felt that services should not rely solely on the use of wording as shown above and publicity relating to the provision of a service should manage expectations more realistically and clearly. It was suggested that in some instances, information should be clearer about what to do if things go wrong, or how to complain if a customer is not satisfied.

3.3.7   During a brief review by Panel members of editions 59 to 98 of the Open House magazine it was observed that the magazines include a good range of information that affected or was of interest to many people. However, it was also felt there were a number of articles that appeared to be politically driven, with local councillors photographs or comments taking precedence. In addition, it was noted that some important issues were missing, particularly around benefit changes and Universal Credit. Panel members made a number of suggestions for regular items – team / section contact information and a regular focus on the work of different teams.

3.3.8   Two Panel members observed an Open House editorial meeting and noted that in addition to the items suggested for the current issue, there was also a long list of articles held over from previous issues. It was clear that items had to be prioritised and items considered to be less important were set aside and carried over to the next issue, to make space for the more 'important' items.

3.3.9   Whilst the Panel only identified a few examples, Panel members felt that the Open House magazine included comments and language that was not felt to be as completely honest and factual as it could be and may raise a readers expectation. This magazine is a vehicle used by the housing and other council services to promote new initiatives and draw attention to recent successes within the service.

3.3.10 The main source of unqualified or subjective comments and language was found to be in the quotes from residents, officers or councillors who used phrases such as "…exciting new developments…" "...it was just amazing." This new provision "…will last for decades" and "…is a great way to…"

Recommendations

3.1   (3.3.1-3) That service managers continue to provide honest and objective information on the website and in leaflets or other literature, to ensure residents are given clear facts about a service, how to access it and what they can expect from it.

3.2   (3.3.5-6) That service managers ensure that information about the service provides realistic details of the service to be provided which manages customer expectations. In addition that clear reference be made about what to do if a customer is unhappy with the service and how to complain.

3.3   (3.3.7-8) That the editorial teams for Open House and other such publications strive to ensure that these publications prioritise the information that is most relevant to the residents that read the magazine. In addition that priority is given to information that affects the less affluent and vulnerable in the local community.

3.4   (3.3.9-10) That any information or copy provided in Open House or other publications should be scrutinised to ensure it is realistic and that quotations etc., are selected or edited in order to ensure the article does not raise expectations unrealistically.

3.4.0   How accessible is it?

3.4.1   Accessibility to accurate and clear information is a significant area of concern to panel members who have identified issues in all previous Scrutiny Panel reports. It was also clear from various minutes of other meetings, including the Tenant and Leaseholder Panel (TLP) that many residents shared these concerns.

3.4.2   Paper copies of literature had previously been made readily available in the reception areas of Taberner House and the district offices. In addition, relevant information was provided in other locations (such as CALAT etc.) or at events and meetings. However, printed information is not displayed in Access Croydon and the district offices are closed. Residents report they have been told by staff that some printed information can be provided upon request, but most commonly and increasingly, residents are referred to the website for information.

3.4.3   As in previous exercises, the panel have accepted that access to online facilities is increasing as more people are getting online. However, the panel feel that the move to reduce the availability of printed information and advice about housing services does not meet the needs of the large numbers of council residents who are not yet online.

3.4.4   The 2016 STAR survey shows that of the 1578 responses only 47% of council tenants use the internet regularly, falling to 24% of those over 60. This is a slightly different question from the 2014 survey but suggests there may have been a slight increase in use of the internet since the 2014 survey, where 51% of the 1410 respondents stated they do not use the internet. However it is clear that many tenants, particularly the elderly and those with mental health issues etc., still do not have internet access and the absence of printed information may disadvantage some of these people.

3.4.5   The website has also come in for some criticism from residents over some time, during other panel meetings, etc., as noted in 3.4.1 above. Historically, there have been regular references to difficulty with navigation, links not working and poor processing speed and a significant amount of information being out of date.

3.4.6   At the TLP meeting in May 2016, Hayley Lewis, the head of communications and engagement informed residents that the website had been re launched in January 2015 following consultation with local residents and businesses. She said the new site uses different software which is quicker, allows use of video clips and can be accessed more easily from mobile devices. Hayley suggested the new website was much easier to navigate around, was more reliable and more responsive.

3.4.7   However, the panel members who accessed the website in April 2016 as part of this Scrutiny exercise to look for information on resident involvement still felt that [the website] "seemed to be a little cumbersome and not very easy to navigate". Another member, looking for information on caretaking commented, "It took several guesses/clicks to find the information but once there, the rest was easy to navigate".

3.4.8   A panel member looked for information on the website about the Tenant and Leaseholder Panel. There was some general information readily available on the resident involvement front page but the link to agendas and minutes, involved clicking and searching 4 further pages to get to the calendar of council meetings, where a customer then needs to search by date for the panel meeting they are looking for and open minutes from there.

3.4.9   The focus group attempted to find information about parking for a disabled resident on council estates. The group felt the information on the 'council estates parking' web page was not very comprehensive, as it only showed details about the residents parking scheme operating on some housing estates, which did not include links to disabled parking and how to apply.

3.4.10   On reaching the Housing section front page, various section headings (including: council housing, home ownership, etc.) provide a few lines explaining what the reader will see on the next page. Users click on the relevant section header to get to the next level where they will normally find further sub headings. Some

residents at the focus group suggested drop down menus might be an easier way to navigate from one page to the other but a number of organisations (Kingston and Amicus Horizon) use the section heading layout with a short paragraph showing what the user can expect to see on the next level and this was generally felt to be useful, although it was agreed that some service areas the number of sub headings made the page look cluttered, e.g. Council Housing led to 15 sub headings.

3.4.11   The website also provides a range of 'Most popular activities' tabs, both on the home page, service front page and on many of the sub pages. Many of these link the customer to a page enabling them to complete a transaction, such as to report something or make a payment etc. This is felt to be a useful option and reduces the need for multiple clicks in order to carry out such popular transactions, or to check information.

3.4.12   A panel member went online to report a repair and reported it "was a simple process". They had to log onto the My Account system in order to carry out this transaction. The process for providing details of the tenant and the property flowed well and the further menus to select various repairs were also felt to be straightforward. On completion, the system generated a page confirming the order.

3.4.13   The panel member used the popular activities tabs to access the repairs process and also used the search function. In both cases they found they were taken straight to the correct page to sign into My Account and begin the transaction. The member did suggest that repairs schematics or similar be provided to improve residents understanding of the various elements of their home and improve the accuracy of residents reporting repairs themselves.

3.4.14   Some users had previously found the search function was a more reliable way of finding what was required as the various section or sub headings were not very clear. e.g. In a previous exercise the Panel found that looking for information about ASB affecting council housing residents was more direct if the search function was used. However, the current council housing web pages include a sub heading which clearly relates to ASB.

3.4.15   A number of other concerns were noted relating to the site not being intuitive and pages not displaying correctly. The Panel accept that the less experienced users may experience difficulties due (at least in part) to lack of understanding, or issues related to the individuals hardware such as poor quality connections, slow processing speed, etc., However, overall, the Panel felt the performance and navigation around the website can still be improved.

3.4.16   The font style and text size used across the website is clear and easily legible. This compares favourably with a number of RSLs such as Amicus and is easier to read than many other London boroughs, e.g. Southwark and Wandsworth who use a smaller font style.

3.4.17   At the bottom of each web page there is a link to the 'accessibility' page which provides information about what the council have done to make the website accessible to those with disabilities, or others who find accessing the website difficult. However the current range of options to improve accessibility further,

appears to be limited to being able to change the font size and options to access translation.

3.4.18 Some other providers offer a broader range of access features and options, such as changing text and background colours, Access Keys which allow the user to move from one part of the site to another using the keyboard and Browsealoud which 'reads' the text to the user. Croydons equality and inclusion policy (2014/16) suggests Browsealoud will be available but it does not appear to have been made available, since it is not displayed as an option on the accessibility web page. Wandsworth, Greenwich and Lambeth do not appear to use this software but Sutton housing Partnership and Amicus do.

3.4.19 The accessibility page on the Croydon website also offers to provide a translation service. Customers are informed they can contact the Councils translation service although there is no direct link to the web page for the translation and interpreting service. Alternately they are directed to Google translate or similar websites to translate text.

3.4.20 The panel looked at the A-Z listing for the housing service, which was not very comprehensive and generally not felt to be very helpful. There are a number of services / topics missing from the listing, there is no reference to ASB, housing fraud, tenancy services, tenancy conditions, resident involvement, planned maintenance or parking on estates. Most of these are available on the website.

3.4.21 Some of the A-Z listings were also felt to be confusing. The caretaking service is listed under H for Housing Caretakers, contents insurance is under C for Council housing home insurance, while other areas are listed twice, using different service descriptors, such as repairs, shown as 'Repairs – council property' and 'Housing repairs – council property', and the mediation service is listed as 'Community mediation service' and 'Housing mediation', all of which may be confusing.

Recommendations

4.1 (3.4.2-4) The Panel feel that the council's aim to increase the number of people online is excluding some of the most vulnerable and therefore the organisation should continue to produce well written and attractive printed literature – particularly relating to issues likely to be of importance to the elderly and those with mental health issues etc. – and ensure this is readily available to those customers.

4.2 (3.4.7-9) That all housing service areas are tasked with looking at the web pages for their service and ensure that the information displayed is comprehensive and provides information relating to all elements of that service. In addition, that the service works with the web team to ensure that links are provided which follow the shortest route logical pattern.

4.3 (3.4.10-12) That the web design team continue to provide section and sub headings. In addition service managers should take a critical look at the relevant pages to ensure the website offers customers a selection of clear headings and

that these are grouped in such a way that the number of sub headings is limited as far as possible, to ensure the page is easy to take in.

4.4   (3.4.17-18) That a full accessibility review is carried out by an independent organisation such as System Concepts Ltd or AbilityNet (which is a registered charity). The company must have specialist knowledge of the diverse needs of the councils' customer base and an understanding of what the various software packages can offer the easiest access to enable all customers who use the website.

4.5   (3.4.19) That an email link to the councils own translation service be provided on the 'accessibility' page of the website.

4.6   (3.4.20-21) That a full review of the Housing A – Z listing is carried out, to ensure these are more comprehensive and that entries are listed in a more logical form.

3.5.0   How clear and easy to understand is it?

3.5.1   It has been commented that the majority of material (other than letters) the council produces is to notify or inform local residents of current policies, information and proposed developments. A lesser amount will be to provide news or updates on completed projects and success stories.

3.5.2   As a result, much of the material the Panel looked at, contains important and often complex information which members agreed should be clearly written in language that is easy for all local residents to understand, in order to meet its' purpose.

3.5.3   The focus group who looked at printed information commented that it was important that small leaflets and posters etc, were self explanatory as the subject matter may be new to the reader. In addition, language used must be simple, avoiding jargon or technical words, unless these were explained within the item.

3.5.4   The larger more formal publications such as the Leaseholders Handbook and the Tenancy Conditions included more examples of using technical or legal terms and complex phrases. The focus group and the Panel both accept it may be a requirement to use particular wording in order to comply with legislation etc. However, long, unpunctuated sentences using complex language was felt by the Panel to be very confusing and unhelpful. Where this writing style or complex terms and phrases have to be used, it was felt that further detail or explanation should be provided to help the readers understanding.

3.5.5   An example of such complex wording is the definition of 'the council' in the Tenancy conditions booklet, which states "The council: also referred to as we, us or our, the council of the London borough of Croydon represented by housing staff and any other member of staff or duly authorised agent of the council with delegated authority to manage your licence and enforce these conditions."

3.5.6   The Conditions of tenancy booklet included a significant amount of legal or technical language with little explanatory information. In addition the use of

words used frequently but in a different context was felt to be unhelpful, e.g. the reference to "…their [the councils'] agents" in the above may not be clear.

3.5.7   The Panel also looked at examples of similar documents from other landlords and noted in many cases, (particularly local authorities) such language and phrasing was used, however, Sutton Housing Partnership and Amicus were examples where the wording used was felt by the Panel to be much easier to understand.

3.5.8   The group found very few examples of wording that was unclear in either the leaflets, or Open House. However, the few exceptions included: The 'Are you having a FOB' leaflet which was generally a good example of clear wording but the group felt the phrase "...may compromise security" could be improved by '…the security of the block may be reduced…' The Managing debt leaflet included the phrase "…evidence of a degree of financial probity." which very few people understood and Open House (issue 100 – p3) referred to "the behavioural awareness trial…" which may be the correct term for the provision of murals the article was about but this wording was felt to be unwieldy and unclear.

3.5.9   Giving examples was agreed to be a good way of helping to provide clarity where some technical or complicated language is unavoidable. Examples of this are in the Leaseholder Guide – where clarification about "…exterior elements and main structure…" is given by use of a list of examples. This document included other good examples but the focus group found the paragraph titled "Work tenders" confusing, with little explanation of the terms "competitive tender", and "specification".

3.5.10 The focus group and the Panel also concurred that where items were dealing with complex information, it was paramount that the facts were laid out in an appropriate and logical order and did not "dart about" from one topic to another. The 'Managing debt' leaflet included a paragraph on pawnbrokers, which followed by a paragraph on the credit union, then a further paragraph giving information about pawnbrokers.

Recommendation

5.1   (3.5.4-7) That the reviews suggested in 2.1 and 2.2 of larger items be used as an opportunity to consider significantly changing the style and language used but as a minimum to ensure that these items are much easier to understand and that any complex language or jargon is removed where possible.

5.2   (3.5.8-9) That information on the website and the various leaflets be reviewed by each team or service across the housing service to ensure that items not meeting a high standard of clarity are either removed or rewritten. Where relevant some clear explanation of complex wording be provided, using examples if appropriate.

5.3   (3.5.10) That all items produced for customers are thoroughly checked by the service responsible for developing the information, to ensure it is presented in a logical order that makes sense and that such items are independently proof read to ensure any errors and omissions are identified prior to printing.

3.6.0 Does the organisation consult with service users?

3.6.1   The Panel heard from council officers in the Corporate communications team and the housing service that there is some consultation with residents / users about various items of communication but this appeared to be sporadic.

3.6.2   The Open House magazine has a regular Editorial Group which is convened by the resident liaison officer. The media relations officer attends along with a range of council officers representing the housing service. Meetings are open to residents as well, however normally only 2 or 3 attend. Two Panel members observed a meeting and reported that officers and managers put forward a substantial number of items for inclusion and commented on the previous issue but there were very few suggestions from the residents present at the meeting.

3.6.3   The Panel were informed about the Checked by Croydon group. This group has not met for a number of years but an officer who was involved with the group in the past felt it helped the council to "produce information that was written in a way that was clear and accessible" to residents. The group was made up of residents and officers who met from time to time to consider a range of written information and publicity, including standard letters, leaflets and booklets.

3.6.4   The Panel found a number of other providers currently operate a similar group. Sutton Housing Partnership (SHP) operate a Residents' Reading Panel to 'test publications and leaflets' that they produce. According to SHP's website the Residents' Reading Panel has helped to improve Homefront (their housing magazine), the Major Works Guide for Leaseholders and the Annual Report.

3.6.5   Residents of Wandsworth are also invited to join a Focus Group to look at new leaflets, or to review some pages on the website. This can be by attending a meeting or via a 'virtual' group using email, Skype, etc.

3.6.6   It was noted at a Panel meeting that the council does not appear to have used email or other forms of electronic networking to provide opportunity to residents to comment on proposed wording or layout of items of written communication or the website.

3.6.7   The Panel spoke to residents who had been involved in the production of the new Repairs Guide. The revised Repairs Guide was drafted by officers from the relevant service, with support from the new repairs partner. The draft was then taken to meetings of the Repairs Steering Group (a group of residents who meet quarterly to discuss issues within the responsive repairs service.)

3.6.8   The residents were generally happy with the layout and design but made a significant number of suggestions to improve the wording and general content. In particular, changes were made to make the final document easier to understand by the removal of some technical language or provide explanations where relevant.

3.6.9   In addition, the Repairs development manager noted that this group of residents were asked for their views on the customer satisfaction survey and were

responsible for "…radically changing the wording…" of the survey to make it clearer and easier to understand.

3.6.10   Historically, residents have occasionally been asked to provide their views regarding wording to other larger documents, particularly the revised tenancy conditions and the resident involvement agreement. In both cases, a small group of residents were invited to be involved in working with officers to agree the wording, layout and general design of these items.

3.6.11   The Head of communications noted that the recent review of the corporate website was conducted by officers working with a group of residents to identify preferences around overall layout, design style, navigation etc. The review did not consider the wording of individual entries on the site as this is the responsibility of the individual service teams and managers but did identify potential improvements to layout, navigation etc.

Recommendations

6.1   (3.6.2) That the service responsible for Open House considers using a different format for gaining views from residents about the magazine as well as asking residents for ideas for topics.

6.2   (3.6.3-6) That the housing service develop a resident working group with the responsibility of looking at written communication items and the various pages on the website, from a residents perspective. This group should have the authority to 'award' relevant items with some form of accreditation. In addition the service should explore the use of online / email options to enable wider participation.

6.3   (3.6.7-9) That the individual officers responsible for producing items of communication for the housing service, actively engage with the working group (as above). The views of residents must be considered to ensure the information is presented in clear language and an easy to read format, whilst the item must remain accurate and fit for purpose.

6.4   (3.6.10-11) That the council continue to value and listen to the needs and views of residents when large scale reviews of a service or a particular piece of information are being undertaken.

3.7.0   Are service users satisfied with the written communication?

3.7.1   There is a limited amount of information regarding customer satisfaction with the various leaflets the housing service produces and the Panel felt this lack of information was considered to be an issue in itself.

3.7.2   Panel members and members of the focus group looking at printed information were asked if they were generally satisfied with the various communications they had looked at. In general, most were satisfied but it was also agreed that the huge range of subjects covered, using different design styles and layouts made a

general answer unrealistic. They felt that customer satisfaction with a particular item should be assessed individually.

3.7.3   Open House readers are regularly asked their views on the magazine. The most recent survey was undertaken in the Spring 2016. Of 580 respondents to the questions, 90% felt the magazine was fairly or very useful and 91% felt it was fairly or very interesting. In the same survey, 68% of the 583 people who responded said that they read the magazine thoroughly with a further 19% saying they glanced through it. 6% of 583 respondents stated they do not read it [at all].

3.7.4   These results appear to be encouraging but the Panel noted that this is less than a 4% return from the 16,500 tenants and leaseholders who were sent the magazine at that time.

3.7.5   The council have little data available regarding satisfaction with the pages on the website. A star rating system appears at the bottom of each page and customers can click on one of three options. After clicking on one of the options, customers are prompted to provide more information about the reasons for their rating and can provide contact information if they wish to discuss their views in further detail. The results from this are not produced for each service area but the satisfaction with the council website is 57% and the Place department web pages is 62%.

3.7.6   The recent STAR survey showed that 72% of respondents felt the council was good or very good at keeping people informed, although the Panel felt this question was very broad and no other detail was given as to why people responded in this way or what methods of informing were referred to.

Recommendations

7.1   (3.7.1-2) That the Resident liaison officer conduct some customer satisfaction activity to assess the views of residents on the individual items of printed material that are currently in wide circulation. Further that this work is fed back to the relevant service managers who should withdraw items not meeting a high level of satisfaction, with view to redesigning or rewriting the item.

7.2   (3.7.3-4) That the recent survey regarding Open House, be followed up with some further work to more widely gauge levels of readership and determine how useful residents feel this magazine is to them and in particular to gain an insight into what would make the magazine more attractive or of interest to a higher number of residents.

7.3   (3.7.5-6) That the council develop more meaningful customer feedback around website usage and that a joint officer / resident steering group be established to more closely monitor the provision and ongoing development of the website, particularly as the organisation aspires to increase the use of this method of communication.

3.8.0   Workload, staff structure and procedures

3.8.1   The Panel met with the Head of corporate communications and engagement who provided a structure chart for the service. The service currently employs 5 team managers responsible for Media relations; Publicity and graphics design, Website, Communications and engagement and Internal communications. The service also employs a total of 16 officers.

3.8.2   To produce the types of written communication this scrutiny exercise is considering, the housing service works with the Publicity and graphic design team, the Web team and the Media relations team.

3.8.3   Corporate guidance is in place which states that "All public facing documents whether large or small must go through Croydon Design. [the publicity & graphic design team] Not only does this help in presenting the consistency and quality of design but it helps embed our branding across everything we do".

3.8.4   The Panel were informed that there are templates which can be used by officers when they are developing basic items that will only be distributed to a limited audience, such as agendas for meetings, or instruction manuals that will only be seen by people involved in a particular project. The design of all other items; such as promotional material for open events, leaflets detailing service provision, advice leaflets and booklets such as tenancy conditions etc., must be completed by the Design team.

3.8.5   Once the Design team have discussed the work required with the requesting officers, there will usually be a delay from between 2 to 5 working days before starting the work. Production of the final design will vary according to the complexity of the work and how many amendments are made. The team appear to be well resourced – with 3 principal designers and a deputy manager. In addition they are able to buy in agency staff, if required.

3.8.6   Access to an in house design service means that individual officers do not need to have design experience in order to achieve a good quality finished item. In addition, using the Design team ensures compliance with the corporate branding style.

3.8.7   The web team are responsible for placing information on the website, on behalf of services across the council. The team are not responsible for editing text etc., as they are not knowledgeable about the service. They will advise on the use of links, video clips etc. and general issues around navigation from section to section and can provide specialist advice on tracking web usage or setting up transactions. In addition, the web team can upload newsletters and other more complex items on behalf of services but again will do little work on the content. Projected timescales to carry out this work vary from 1 day to update existing webpage content to 10 days for the more complex tasks.

3.8.8   An officer explained that only members of the web team can now update or edit existing information or create new content on the website. Whilst the web team are usually able to put items on the web when requested and within the given timescales, this was not always the case. It was reported that the web team are occasionally unable to support all requests on time and this has led to delays. In

addition, the need to go through the web team has added another level to the process which is inevitably slightly slower than service staff placing information on the web themselves.

3.8.9   More importantly, where the web team have not understood or have not followed an instruction from a service correctly, any further instructions to correct an error have to be made as a separate request. The officer added that this situation does create problems occasionally which can result in incorrect information being displayed on the website for a few days or longer, before being amended.

3.8.10   As stated earlier, producing and editing the Open House magazine is shared between the Resident liaison officer and a media relations officer. Both these officers work in different teams and have other work to complete which was reported to create issues with the two officers not being able to prioritise this work. The production of the magazine can also be delayed as this extra level of management creates the need for discussions around what is included in each issue.

3.8.11   In addition, the text and design must also be 'signed off' (approved) by senior service managers and directors as well as Cabinet members. Occasionally, final stage production is delayed while all parties concerned provide their approval. The final approved version of the Open House magazine will then be passed to the Design team to be finished and sent to print.

3.8.12   Officers had noted there is little training or support offered to staff about how to produce clearly written text, or how to get the most out of leaflets, or the website. The Design team and the web team provide some advice to assist staff with the layout and design of their items as noted above but service staff are expected to devise text, as they understand their own service. However, there were many examples of text being poorly worded or unclear.

3.8.13   The need for services to use the Design team has removed the opportunity for officers who may be capable of developing simple items such as posters or a leaflet, from being able to maximise on this development opportunity.

Recommendations

8.1   (3.8.3-6) The Panel were pleased to note that the provision of the corporate design policy supported by a dedicated in house design service has resulted in consistent and good quality items being produced that meet the agreed design standards. However, the Panel feel that the council must continue to ensure the Design team are sufficiently resourced to support the design requirements of the service teams in an efficient and timely manner.

8.2   (3.8.7-9) That the council prioritises servicing the web site to ensure that the information from service teams is managed efficiently and that a process is established to enable the web team to offer requesting officers / teams a more timely and reliable service. In addition to investigate a way to allow staff to 'see' what will be available on a web page and make minor changes prior to the information going live.

> 8.3   (3.8.10-11) That the management of the production of Open House is handed to the Resident liaison officer and any decisions relating to the content of the magazine be with officers from the housing management service in the first instance, who have best knowledge and insight into the needs of residents. This to be considered in conjunction with actions 6.1 and 7.1 above.
>
> 8.4   (3.8.12-13) That the council develop support and training opportunities for staff who are involved in producing text for the website or devising leaflets and other guidance for customers, to improve the quality of the content of written items, to ensure they meet their aims. In addition that those staff who have experience or show a good understanding of basic design be given access to a wider range of templates that will allow them to produce simple items for their team or service.

3.9.0   Value for money

3.9.1   It was difficult to determine how much staff time is spent on the initial production of printed communication and writing text for the website. As noted above individual teams and services decide what items to develop and who should produce them. Officers in the service team develop some initial ideas and text which is then passed to the web team or the Design team.

3.9.2   The time spent on this work is not generally logged or recorded separately and as a result it is not possible to estimate the cost of this work to the organisation. Some service teams have a communications 'expert' who is familiar with the process for developing clear and suitable wording, devising literature and putting information on the website. These staff can advise colleagues and possibly reduce time spent on a badly designed / worded item.

3.9.3   The design team is a zero funded business unit, meaning they are not directly funded by the council. They monitor their work and record the time spent on each service and recharge the costs to end users direct, making no profit or surplus. They subsidise the service to internal council customers by revenue obtained from external customers.

3.9.4   According to the design team, the internal council spend on design and print this year (2015 / 16) is estimated at:

Internal design all departments: £176,943
Internal print all departments: £169,196
External design: £68,544
External print: £54,970
TOTAL   £469,653

The charge to internal council customers for design is £50 per hour.

3.9.5   As a comparison, it was suggested that salaries for council officers who may devise printed information themselves, may range from approx. £20.00 to £25.00 per hour. Staff in the design team have access to advanced design software and have good levels of experience and knowledge. The Design team suggest their

service is cost effective as they could produce items much quicker than other council staff.

3.9.6   In addition, the Design team have negotiated a set of standard prices (as shown below) with a print company, which appear competitive. Printing is a very competitive business and prices on the internet for a 250 run of flyers on A4 on silk paper ranged from £33.00 from Solopress to £65.00 from Printing.com.

Examples of basic print costs using the council's approved supplier:

2 pages A5 - 250 x copies: £35
2 pages A5 - 500 x copies: £55
2 pages A5 - 1,000 x copies: £65

1 pages A4 - 250 x copies: £35
1 pages A4 - 1,000 x copies: £135
1 pages A4 - 3,000 x copies: £198

8 pages A4 - 500 x copies: £225
8 pages A5 - 3,000 x copies: £362
8 pages A5 - 50 x copies: £35

3.9.7   The Panel felt the amount of money spent on design and print to be quite high but in the absence of any comparative figures from other similar sized authorities it was difficult to be more specific. However, using a small business unit within the organisation does appear to represent good value for money in general terms, particularly around providing an 'expert' service which is clearly well equipped and resourced.

3.9.8   The cost of designing, printing and posting the Open House magazine to all 17,500 tenants and leaseholders was around £15,000 to 16,000, which worked out to be just less than £1.00 per copy. The magazine is now only printed and mailed to around 450 residents, with a further 200 being sent an email link to the electronic copy which remains available online. The Panel were disappointed at the decision to only offer hard copies of Open House to residents that specifically request it. They accepted that the reduced print and post run represents a significant saving but it was noted that the significant time and costs spent on developing text and design will still remain.

3.9.9   The Panel observed that the housing service do not appear to use any form of sponsorship or collaborative funding arrangement for any of their written or online communications. A Panel member located a magazine from the councils' healthy lifestyles team which included a variety of sponsored pages and adverts. Using sponsorship of this type of item could be used to offset the cost of production for magazines or other large items.

Recommendations
9.1   (3.9.7) In conjunction with the survey work in 7.2 above, that further consideration is given to whether Open House is reduced to an email newsletter only – similar in format to the Involve newsletter. This will further reduce printing and postage as well as making the design easier and quicker.

9.2	(3.9.8) That the housing service examine opportunities to sell advertising space or develop sponsorship of certain items of printed material to relevant businesses or external organisations. In addition that greater consideration is given to working in partnership with other councils, government departments and external providers, in order to share resources and costs involved in developing leaflets and other literature.

4.0   CONCLUSIONS & NEXT STEPS

4.1   The Panel are pleased to report that staff responded positively to the review, were open and candid in their replies and appeared willing to consider ways to improve the way the housing service communicates with its' customers.

4.2   The Panel noted that a good deal of the promotional literature and leaflets are well designed and that much of the content of the communication items that were examined, was clear and of a good standard.

4.3   However, there are a number of concerns which may be significantly reduced by introducing a greater level of scrutiny of the web pages and printed material and in particular that residents views are sought, before these items are published.

4.4   In addition, senior management must encourage officers to take greater responsibility for the quality of written communication, which is often the front line of the service. Poorly written and out of date literature, tired notice boards and a website that is difficult to use does not present the organisation as professional and efficient.

4.5   It is the intention of the Panel that this report and the 36 recommendations contained within it will be presented to senior managers for their comments prior to a final Action Plan being developed, detailing the actions agreed by management for implementation in the future.

4.6   The Panel will then present the agreed report and Action Plan to the Tenant and Leaseholder Panel for their support, before publishing the report and Action Plan on the council website.

4.7   The Panel will then continue to liaise with senior managers to monitor progress of the Action Plan on an ongoing basis.