



southessexhomes

working together

South Essex Homes

External Communication Strategy

2007-2010

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1.0 Background

South Essex Homes is the Arms Length Management Organisation (ALMO) that manages and maintains the housing stock for Southend Borough Council. South Essex Homes was formed in October 2005 and our Mission statement is:

Working together to:

involve Residents
invest in decent homes
improve services
and build strong, proud **communities**

We believe the Balanced Scorecard enables us to more effectively link specific strategic and operational goals to our mission, and we have integrated the Balanced Scorecard within our External and Internal strategies. We have identified critical success factors within five key dimensions that we believe capture the essence of our business.

These dimensions are;

- Customers first
- Best value
- Performance
- People matter
- Community impact

These Strategies will be reviewed annually and updated to take account of any significant internal or external factors.

Since the formation of South Essex Homes a Communications Strategy has been developed and a number of key outcomes have been achieved, including:

- ▶ Introduction of a website described by the Audit Commission as “Informative”
- ▶ Positive press and media stories
- ▶ Re-launch of Insight Magazine
- ▶ Re-formation of Readers Panel
- ▶ Community Involvement Committee

However, South Essex Homes now needs to sustain and improve upon the current level of communication in order to achieve higher levels of Resident satisfaction.

2.0 What is good communication?

Communication can be defined as a process of sharing information, ideas or attitudes that result in a degree of understanding. Communication is the

responsibility of the entire Organisation and all staff members, regardless of level and should not be the sole responsibility of the Communications and Media Manager. Communication can travel across all directions - downwards, upwards and sideways -, is an essential part of South Essex Homes' aims, and underpins everything we aim to deliver.

3.0 Objectives:

The Communication Strategy is separated into two sections;

- ▶ External Communication, and
- ▶ Internal Communication.

The two sections allow a more focused approach on delivering effective communication to both staff and Residents. Different tools will be used within each of the strategies, with different outcomes being achieved.

Effective communication centres on identifying the audiences and keeping information up to date and accurate. In return, audiences need to feel they have the tools to be able to respond and communicate to others, and generally feel that South Essex Homes is an organisation that encourages feedback, and promotes involvement and change.

The external Communications Strategy key objectives are to:

- ▶ Increase Resident involvement and communication
- ▶ Improve communication with hard to reach groups
- ▶ Increase and promote the perception of South Essex Homes

4.0 Target Audiences

The following target audiences have been identified;

- ▶ Residents
- ▶ Leaseholders
- ▶ Board Members
- ▶ Block /Street Voices
- ▶ Focus Groups
- ▶ Staff (Please see Internal Communications Strategy)
- ▶ Southend Borough Council i.e. retained housing staff
- ▶ Councillors
- ▶ Local non South Essex Homes residents
- ▶ Housing Specialists
- ▶ Senior Council Officers
- ▶ Media - Local, regional, national and specialist (housing)
- ▶ Southend Tenants' and Residents' Federation
- ▶ Southend Forum
- ▶ Voluntary Groups

5.0 Tools

There are a number of ways that South Essex Homes can communicate to its audiences, including:

- ▶ Letters
- ▶ Surveys
- ▶ Attending events
- ▶ Internet
- ▶ Marketing tools (i.e. Promotion via local shops and offices, notice boards)
- ▶ Newsletters
- ▶ Bulletins
- ▶ Media
- ▶ Meetings / Focus Groups
- ▶ Customer Contact Centre
- ▶ Insight Magazine
- ▶ Southend Tenants and Residents Federation

6.0 Strategy

In order for South Essex Homes to deliver its Communication Strategy a number of key objectives have been outlined.

6.1 Increase resident involvement and communication

Resident Involvement is key to the core aims and objectives of South Essex Homes and in order for this to be achieved, effective two way communication between South Essex Homes and our residents is essential.

High priority

▶ **Insight Newsletter**

Insight is an informative newsletter sent to all Residents and leaseholders every two months. This is a vital form of communication for South Essex Homes and has helped promote the independence of South Essex Homes from the Council.

Future suggestions for articles include;

- “Getting to know you” - an informal section where Board Members and Senior Managers are introduced
- “Do you know” hard facts and figures about accomplishments, targets reached value for money ideas.
- Helpful hints and tips from Contractors i.e. energy saving tips
- Youth page/fun page and prize draws and incentives
- Reminder of open invitation to attend Board Meetings



▶ **Communication questionnaire**

Carry out an annual questionnaire on a range of issues including the usefulness of Insight and the website. A prize draw will be an added incentive to encourage completed returns.

▶ **Rent Matters**

Twice yearly introduce a “Rent Matters” newsletter that will include information about rent arrears, how to pay rent and where money is spent etc.

▶ **Readers Panel**

Expand the membership and remit of the Readers Panel to continue to review Insight and future publications.

▶ **Tenant Approved Tick box**

Introduce a tenant approved tick box to be included on publications when they have been agreed by the Readers Panel. Example



▶ **Tenants Handbook**

Re-launch the Tenants’ handbook in consultation with the Tenancy Management Focus Group. The tenant’s handbook will include a diversity questionnaire.

▶ **TIE-In event (Tenants Information Exchange)**

Attend the annual TIE-in event organised by the Southend Tenants and Residents Federation. The 2007 event provides the opportunity for consultation about the Diversity Strategy and Equality scheme, Mission Statement and website.

▶ **Website**

Seek to gain RNIB and Bobby approval for the website. Ensure that all aspects of the website are kept up to date and accurate including policies and procedures. Display up to date information including results of Estate Walkabouts and maintain links with Southend Borough Council corporate website.

▶ **Mission Statement**

Review Mission Statement with residents on the Sounding Board and the Federation. Suggest different options for residents to select, produce and publicise the Mission Statement following its review.

Medium priority

▶ **Notice Boards**

Review the existing notice boards in all communal areas and ensure that these display up to date and relevant information. This is to include “Contact Us” posters and “Meet your Housing Officer” posters.

▶ **South Essex Homes Guides**

Produce a series of guides about different services and support available through South Essex Homes. These could include:

- Gas safety
- Rent Arrears
- Comments, Complaints and Compliments
- Resident Support
- Anti Social Behaviour
- Modern Homes and caring for your home
- Domestic violence
- Ways to pay
- Translation information

▶ **Meet the Board event**

Hold an informal session where members of staff from a number of departments can meet the Board and ask questions on a range of issues.

▶ **Direct Debit Incentive**

Include details of the Direct Debit incentive scheme with the quarterly rent statements.

▶ **2008 Calendar**

Produce a 2008 calendar listing the Board Meetings, Focus Group and Estate Walkabout dates.

Low priority

▶ **Community Events**

Attend local community events as and when required to promote the services of South Essex Homes.

6.2 Improve communication with hard to reach groups

South Essex Homes have a commitment to respond to the needs of all our audiences, and a special effort should be made to communicate with hard to reach groups. This form of communication should be inclusive of the overall strategy and not just as an addition, however individual needs may vary. It is important to understand the needs and requirements of these groups so that South Essex Homes can establish the best tools for communicating with them. In some cases it may be that individuals belong to more than one hard to reach group. This Strategy aims to ensure that all audiences have equal access to our services, whilst recognising that some audiences may require more support than others. In order to respond to this need, good communication is essential.

A hard to reach group can be any group which is difficult to access for any reason, such as:

- Physical inaccessibility (e.g. older or frail people)
- Language (e.g. first generation immigrants to the UK)
- Perceptions and Traditions (e.g. disadvantaged young people)
- Social expectations (e.g. young people who are often not considered and who do not consider themselves as likely to be taken seriously)

South Essex Homes hard to reach groups include (although this is not a definitive list):

- Sheltered housing residents
- Leaseholders
- Residents in dispersed properties
- Ethnic minority residents
- Homeless people
- Children and young people
- Drug users
- Gay men, lesbian women and transsexual or transgender people
- Minority ethnic communities
- Victims of domestic violence
- Frail or isolated older people
- Asylum seekers
- People with learning difficulties
- People with disabilities
- People with mental health problems
- Faith communities

The 2006 STATUS Survey for South Essex Homes showed that the majority of our residents are White British (94%), almost half (46%) are wholly retired from work and almost two thirds (63%) said that they have a longstanding illness, disability or infirmity. South Essex Homes therefore need to ensure all group needs are recognised and responded to, to ensure that no audiences are isolated.

High

▶ Translation Services

- Website- Ensure consistency across all publications for translation services and increase translation services on website.
- Publications- Ensure that details of the document translation service is used on all publications, and continue to produce documents on request and in advance in different formats.
- Finger alphabet cards- Introduce finger alphabet cards for all front line staff. (example shown)
- Assess demand for alternative formats



▶ **Youth Page**

Include a youth page twice yearly in Insight newsletter to focus on young persons issues, including a relevant competition.

▶ **Youth Sounding Board**

Carry out a youth Sounding Board to gauge the issues and needs of young people.

Medium

▶ **Participate in International events**

Participate in International and religious festivals throughout the year, by attending events and decorating Area Offices. This also provides the opportunity to consult about particular issues. To date, Chinese New Year, St Patrick's Day and Easter have been celebrated.

▶ **Leasehold Focus**

Produce an annual newsletter solely for leaseholders entitled "Leasehold Focus" to cover a range of issues including service charges and current news stories.

Low

▶ **Community Support**

Attend and consult with local community support groups about particular issues or projects as and when necessary. There are currently over 400 local and regional community groups ranging from advocacy for Older People to South East Essex Scottish Society.

6.3 Increase and promote the perception of South Essex Homes

Since its inception, South Essex Homes has had a mixture of both positive and negative press stories. It is crucial that South Essex Homes continue to portray a positive image about our services, whilst learning from negative media stories.

High

▶ **Generate increased positive media coverage**

Aim to send out one positive press story to local and regional media each month to boost media coverage and audiences perceptions.

▶ **Decrease the level of negative media coverage**

Respond to media enquires in line with the press protocol, in an efficient and timely manner. This will diminish the media interpreting and translating “bad news stories” in their own way.

Medium

- ▶ Encourage the Senior Management Team and Board Members to become ambassadors for South Essex Homes by speaking to the media about particular regeneration and/or housing issues.

Low

▶ **Media Training**

Offer the opportunity for members of the Senior Management Team and Board Members to attend Media Training to increase confidence levels when speaking to the media.

▶ **Enter Awards**

Enter awards such as UK housing, Local Government Chronicle and Municipal journal to raise the profile of South Essex Homes.

7.0 Conclusion

The Communications Strategy aims to ensure that South Essex Homes communicates in the most effective ways, which will lead to improvements in the way our service is delivered.

There are a number of key aims and objectives South Essex Homes wish to achieve through their Communication Strategy. The success of the Strategy can be partly measured through the annual communications questionnaire, which will measure the following:

- ▶ % of Residents and leaseholders who find Insight helpful and useful
- ▶ % of Residents and leaseholders who are aware of South Essex Homes
- ▶ % of Residents and leaseholders who find our website easy to navigate and informative
- ▶ % of Residents who say we keep them informed
- ▶ % of positive media coverage within the year
- ▶ % of tenants and leaseholder who express a increasing levels of satisfaction with their housing service

If these objectives are met South Essex Homes will be successfully portrayed as an open and professional organisation, committed to putting Residents first.

