

External Communication Strategy 2009-2011

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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**

In February 2009, South Essex Homes achieved its two star status, in reflection of this recent news; these strategies have been revised to support the new business objectives for the organisation. These strategies will be continued to be reviewed annually and updated to take account of any significant internal or external factors.

South Essex Homes needs to sustain and improve upon the current level of communication in order to achieve higher levels of resident satisfaction and to allow the business to grow and the profile raised.

2.0 What is good communication?

Communication is a complex area, with many facets. Without a formalised strategy it is probable that the approach would lack co-ordination and will be less effective.

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 including all staff members, regardless of level and should not be the sole responsibility of the Communications and Media Manager. This strategy will allow the staff and Board Members to understand their role in communication.

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.

Research has proved that effective communication alone has a positive effect on customer satisfaction with services. This will, therefore, have a positive impact on future inspection ratings for example and also communication is an important tool in driving forward change, both cultural and procedural.

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, partners, Board Members 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
- Develop South Essex Homes Marketing opportunities and to encourage new business

4.0 Target Audiences

The following target audiences have been identified;

- Residents including minority groups
- Leaseholders
- 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
- Partners including P H Jones, Connaught and Decent Homes contractors
- Southend Forum
- Voluntary Groups
- External partnering arrangements including Government, Chartered Institute of Housing, Housing Quality Network, HCA, TSA related local public sector bodies, Unions, Registered Social Landlords and also voluntary agencies

5.0 Tools

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

- Letters
- Surveys
- Attending events
- Internet
- Website
- Emails
- Telephone
- Marketing tools (i.e. Promotion via local shops and offices, notice boards)
- Advertising
- Newsletters
- Bulletins
- Media
- Meetings / Focus Groups
- Customer Contact Centre
- Insight Magazine
- DVD and online audio-visual methods
- 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 on a quarterly basis. This is a vital form of communication for South Essex Homes and has helped promote the independence of South Essex Homes. 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

- **Insight questionnaire**

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

- **Communication Focus Group and other Focus Groups**

Expand the membership and remit of the Communication Focus Group to continue to review Insight and other publications. Promote the positive work of all other Focus Groups and encourage involvement.

- **Resident Approved Tick box**

Expand the use of the resident approved tick box to be included on all publications.



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

Attend the annual TIE-in event organised by the Southend Tenants and Residents Federation. The 2009 event provides the opportunity for consultation and participation.

- **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. Ensure the site is accessible and has interactive translation services. Research the possibility of online statements.

- **Marketing and new business**

Develop new ways to generate income for South Essex Homes through targeted marketing and new business opportunities. Please see Marketing Strategy for more information.

■ **Board events**

Hold a series of Board events, including back to the floor exercises for Board Members to understand and gain an insight into the front line services that are provided and an informal session where members of staff from a number of departments can meet the Board and ask questions on a range of issues. This will be an informal opportunity to network and build relationships. Also Promote the chance for residents to use the “voice your view” and the fact meetings are open to the public.

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, “Meet your Housing Officer” posters, Board Member Vacancies and local events. A notice Board in the Board Room will also feature press cuttings, newsletters and photos from previous events.

■ **South Essex Homes Leaflets**

Review all South Essex Homes leaflets on an annual basis and ensure the design used is colourful and user friendly. Ensure that there is a wide range available at Central Area Office.

■ **Residents Guide DVD**

Introduce a DVD version of the residents guide to include sections that can be separated and included on the website and shown up as sign up. For example repairs and maintenance, sign up, resident involvement and decent homes.

■ **Events**

Publicise events including estate walkabouts and board meetings via posters, leaflets, press releases and on the website.

■ **Direct Debit / Rent Arrears Campaign**

Introduce a series of posters and leaflets that portray the message that paying rent on time should be top priority for all tenants. This also includes the monthly prize draw campaigns for arrears free accounts.

■ **Dates for your diary**

Produce an annual dates for your diary publication listing the Board Meetings, Focus Group and Estate Walkabout dates.

■ **Facebook group**

Introduce an online “facebook” group to encourage younger residents to have an input in the service

Low priority

■ Community Events

Attend local community events as and when required to promote the services of South Essex Homes for example Turning Tides Stay Safe.

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
- Residents whose first language is not English
- 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

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

- 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. Review the languages on the box in relation to the resident profile.
- Finger alphabet cards- Introduce finger alphabet cards for all front line staff. (example shown)
- Assess demand for alternative formats



■ Young people Page

Include a youth page twice yearly in Insight newsletter to focus on young persons issues, including a relevant competition and "AM I BOVERED FEATURE".

■ Young People Sounding Board

Carry out a young people Sounding Board, entitled "shout about it" 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. This also provides the opportunity to consult about particular issues. To date, Chinese New Year, St Patrick's Day and Easter have been celebrated.

■ Customer Contact Centre

Continue to promote the use of the customer contact centre through the use of fridge magnets and other targeted publicity.

■ Sheltered news

Introduce a sheltered newsletter for prospective residents highlighting the benefits of sheltered accommodation, this will be funded by sponsorship from local organisations.

■ Leasehold Focus

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

■ Customer feedback

Encourage the need for customer feedback through the promotion of satisfaction surveys, service standards and complaints, compliments and comments.

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

South Essex Homes have made a significant improvement in the amount of positive media and press coverage. 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 generate six positive press story to local and regional media each month to boost media coverage and audiences perceptions. This is managing the information released to the media. It can include supplying a range of good news stories as well as being able to respond effectively to counteract any negative images that result, whatever the cause

■ 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

■ Media Ambassadors

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.

■ Enter Awards

Enter awards such as UK housing, National Federation of ALMO's, Tenant Participation Advisory Services and Evening Echo to raise the profile of South Essex Homes.

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.

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. Responsibility for the strategy lies with the Communication and Media Manager, whose role it is to coordinate the public relations, marketing, website and design functions to ensure they are consistent and effective.

By completing the actions contained within the strategy, the key stakeholders will become more aware and informed of South Essex Homes and the services we provide, and in turn more satisfied with the service they receive.