



Scrutiny of Communication at Havebury Housing Partnership

1. SCOPE

Initial scoping of communications scrutiny took place at our meeting of 11 January 2021. The scope was agreed as follows:

- To identify ways in which Havebury can improve its communication with tenants

2. WHAT WE DID

Following the scoping meeting we agreed that our review would have three strands and that smaller splinter groups of panel members would cover off each. On this basis the methodology below was agreed:

What will be reviewed	Details	How
Communications overview	Gain and understanding of Havebury's external, internal and customer communications from the Communications Manager and Customer Experience Manager	Invite to PSP meeting
External communication	Interview Havebury's Communications Manager to understand Havebury's external communication channels and ensure they are appropriate and inclusive	Invite to PSP splinter group meeting
Complaints and satisfaction data	Understand what drives dissatisfaction and complaints and whether poor communication is a factor	Desktop review
Repairs communication	Identify a methodology for testing Havebury/tenant communication within the repairs service	Discuss at PSP splinter group meeting
Customer journey mapping of repairs service	Review customer journey mapping data covering the repairs service	Commission through Customer Experience Manager
Written communications to tenants	Review a random sample of template and ad-hoc written communications sent to tenants	Desktop review at PSP meeting and splinter group meeting
'Tone of voice principles'	Identify some 'tone of voice' principles through learning from examples of written communication and other strands of the review	With Customer Experience Manager at PSP splinter group meeting
Make recommendations	Review evidence to identify recommendations	Desktop exercise

The communications scrutiny review timetable is set out below. Performance and Scrutiny Panel and additional splinter group meetings were held over Microsoft Teams as we continue to conduct our work remotely.

Action	Date
Scrutiny scoping	11 January 2021
Meeting attended by Communications Manager and Customer Experience Manager	22 February 2021
Analysis of STAR customer satisfaction and complaints data	22 February 2021
PSP annual away day including update and review of communications scrutiny activity and evidence collected to date	29 March 2021
Splinter group meeting with Customer Experience Manager to discuss analysis of repeat/out of scope repairs data and methodology for customer journey mapping	19 May 2021
Splinter group meeting with Communications Manager to review external communications	27 May 2021
Customer journey mapping by Customer Experience Team	June 2021
Review of customer journey mapping results and initial feedback on example written communications to tenants	5 July 2021
Splinter group meeting with Customer Experience Manager to review example written communications to tenants in detail and agree 'tone of voice' principles	19 July 2021
Agree report and recommendations	17 August 2021

3. OUR FINDINGS

- 3.1 Following scoping of the scrutiny and an initial meeting with the Customer Experience Manager (Ellie Darling) and Communications Manager (Hayley Lambert) we decided our review would have three strands:
 - External communication - social media, website, Havebury News etc.
 - Tone of voice - in communicating with tenants in writing
 - Repairs service - communication with tenants from a repair being raised to it being completed
- 3.2 To manage the scrutiny effectively we split into splinter groups to address each strand, meet with relevant staff and undertake scrutiny exercises specific to the strand.
- 3.3 **External communication** - we discussed our own experiences of Havebury's external communications collectively, following which Richard and Aleks met with Hayley to discuss the subject in more detail.
- 3.4 Hayley explained that Havebury uses Facebook, Instagram and Twitter and that these channels had been popular during the pandemic as they allow information to be communicated and updated quickly. Email marketing is also used, alongside Havebury News and general information on the website. We queried

that Havebury News is only sent out twice per year and how Havebury is connecting with tenants who are not online.

- 3.5 As part of developing the Tenant Engagement and Customer Service Strategies, Havebury has collected a significant amount of information on how tenants want to engage, provide feedback and receive information. Vulnerable tenants were contacted regularly during lockdowns and are encouraged to call in if they need help. Posters with relevant updates and information are placed in sheltered and supported schemes.
- 3.6 Accepting that other channels are not as responsive or flexible, we felt strongly that Havebury should work to ensure tenants who can't access digital platforms are not disadvantaged in accessing information they need or would benefit from. As such this was discussed in greater detail in the splinter group meeting.
- 3.7 We reviewed a survey of tenants, which although had a small sample size, indicated that there is an appetite to receive Havebury News on a more regular basis. Utilising the support of the new Customer Engagement post, we endorsed a larger consultation on how best to keep tenants not online informed and sourcing more inclusive content, such as tenant stories, partnership working, local problem solving and 'you said, we did' type articles.
- 3.8 We were unsure as to whether enough data is held on tenants' language preferences, if tenants knew about translation services and could access communication in an alternative language should they need to.
- 3.9 **Tone of voice** - We were provided with around 20 example letters sent to tenants, selected at random. They were a mixture of standard template letters and ad-hoc responses to issues covering tenancy and estates, antisocial behaviour, repairs, assets and income/arrears.
- 3.10 It was acknowledged that there is a fine balance to be struck between setting out what needed to happen next and sounding too dictatorial. Whilst most of the letters served their purpose, there were clear examples of how individually some could have been better.
- 3.11 Often the language was authoritarian, and jargon was used (e.g. UC instead of Universal Credit). We felt that some of the letters were impersonal, referring to 'Havebury' rather than 'we/us' and were not always signed off by an individual.
- 3.12 A few of the letters were not particularly well written and, in some instances, it appeared that they could not have been read back before sending. Two of the letters had been rewritten by Ellie, as examples that with only some slight adjustment to wording, the tone of a letter can be very different.
- 3.13 We agreed that a key objective of any letter regarding a contentious issue should be to de-escalate, rather than escalate, and it was felt that some letters would have had the reverse effect. It was observed that there could also be greater clarity around actions being taken and expected times for completion.

- 3.14 We asked whether letters are checked before they are sent out. Whilst auditing of the quality of communication is carried out in some teams, this is not routine and often performance issues are only identified while investigating a complaint.
- 3.15 It was suggested that in the least, some peer review of letters before they are sent is implemented, if only to catch obvious errors or misuse of tone. We accepted that some issues can be emotive for staff too, especially if having to deal with a difficult customer, and so peer review in these instances especially would be helpful.
- 3.16 A more formal exercise involving managers spot checking letters would identify specific training needs.
- 3.17 In reviewing the example letters in greater detail, the splinter group for this strand (Diane and Aleks) worked with Ellie to agree some ‘tone of voice’ principles including:
- Be respectful, patient and personable e.g. not using ‘we/our/us’ instead of Havebury
 - Use simple language and not jargon, technical terms nor acronyms
 - Not to use accusatory or defensive language
 - Be as clear as possible
- 3.18 Further detail on the above in 3.17 is included as an appendix to this report. In addition, Phil shared with the group information on using behavioural science, nudge theory and the ‘MINDSPACE’ tool which can be used to influence behaviour. We thought this approach would be beneficial to Havebury in securing positive outcomes from Havebury’s written communication.
- 3.19 **Repairs service** - a trigger for the scrutiny of communication was our analysis of complaints and satisfaction data at the panel’s away day. Whilst we noted customer satisfaction is high and complaints are relatively few, poor communication often drives dissatisfaction.
- 3.20 In discussing the topic with Ellie, we found that complaints most often arise not in direct relation to the original issue but due to communication breaking down in resolving it. This is particularly apparent in dealing with more complex repairs due largely to it being highest demand service.
- 3.21 Lee and Phil formed the splinter group for this strand and worked with Ellie on a methodology for carrying out customer journey mapping of the repairs service. As part of this work we analysed repairs requiring repeat visits and properties attracting the most repair orders. We agreed to focus the exercise on ‘out of scope’ repairs.
- 3.22 We commissioned the Customer Experience Team to carry out the customer journey mapping. The team contacted tenants to take part in the exercise who had been in receipt of an ‘out of scope’ repair within the previous few weeks. Information was collected about what happened throughout the repairs process and tenants were asked to rate out ten, their experience and whether their expectations had been met at each stage.

- 3.23 The Customer Experience Team recruited four tenants to the exercise. Details of each customer journey mapped are provided as an appendix to this report.
- 3.24 Repair customer journey map 1 - the tenant ordered a repair to a back door but found that there was no flexibility in the appointments offered by the contractor to fit with their working arrangements. The job could not be completed in one visit and issues with appointments continued. The tenant heard nothing from Havebury and had to phone the contractor to chase progress. At the time of talking to the tenant the repair was still not complete and therefore their expectations had not been met.
- 3.25 Repairs customer journey map 2 - the tenant logged a repair to a back fence on myHavebury and chose an appointment at the same time. Whilst the repair is not yet complete, the tenant was reassured that an inspection had taken place and they felt informed about when the work would be done. However, they did state that under typical circumstances i.e. not during a pandemic, they would have expected the repair to be done sooner.
- 3.26 Repairs customer journey map 3 - the tenant reported a repair to their gate by phone and the next day they received a call with an appointment. The repair was returned as 'no access' despite the tenant having said that as it was outside the work could be completed even if they were not in. When the gate was fixed the tenant was told that part of their fence needed repair too, but they have heard nothing about it since.
- 3.27 Repairs customer journey map 4 - the tenant reported by phone a shattered kitchen window and Havebury attended the same day to make safe. A few days later the contractor called to make arrangements for measuring up, following which an appointment was made to replace the window. In total the repair took six weeks to complete.
- 3.28 In each instance we observed that tenants had been very tolerant of longer repair completion times and wondered if there was a general view of appreciation that Havebury and its contractors carried out repair. Tenants commented on how helpful staff had been and we questioned whether a more independent approach would have realised such high scores.
- 3.29 It was clear that what kept tenants happy was being kept informed and knowing when things would be done. Clarity and greater flexibility around appointments however would realise benefit in improving the service for tenants, especially in cases where repairs are completed by contractors.
- 3.30 We observed through our data analysis and that of the customer journey mapping exercise that in many cases repairs require inspection prior to the work actually being done. Whilst this seemed preferable for more complex works we felt that improved diagnostics at the point a repair is raised would ensure that more repairs can be completed 'right first time' and within a shorter timeframe.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on our findings we make the following recommendations:

1. Accepting that non-digital channels are less flexible/responsive, explore whether tenants who do not have access to online services are kept appropriately informed of things that affect them. Consider whether Havebury News, or a shorter bulletin, could be distributed more regularly. Work to source more inclusive content, such as tenant stories, partnership working, local problem solving and 'you said, we did' type articles.
2. Ensure Havebury's social media channels, website and other forms of engagement are well publicised to new and existing tenants.
3. Review the data held on tenants' language preferences and make it clear in as many places as possible that information can be provided in different languages.
4. Review template letters in accordance with the 'tone of voice principles' established during the review. Promote the principles with colleagues to apply to ad-hoc communication.
5. Implement a process for checking a sample of outbound communications to ensure they meet the 'tone of voice principles' and use results to identify colleagues who may benefit from further training. Encourage staff to seek peer review on outgoing communications which could be deemed contentious and informally apply a 'cooling-off' period before responding on an emotive topic.
6. Explore how behavioural science, nudge theory and the 'MINDSPACE' tool can be applied to template letters and assist in training.
7. Ensure customer journey mapping becomes part of the feedback loop, utilising it to understand the true detail of the customer experience.
8. Review the repairs appointments service (which will be covered in more detail in our next review) so that it is sufficiently clear and flexible, incorporating that offered by contractors.
9. Take steps to improve communication with customers around repairs, particularly where there is likely to be delay or follow-on works.
10. Explore the reasons for repairs requiring pre-inspection to ensure the current volume is not excessive and whether works required can be better diagnosed at the point of reporting.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we refer to the question we aimed to answer at the beginning of the scrutiny:

QUESTION	CONCLUSION
Identify ways in which Havebury can improve its communication with tenants	<p>Poor communication is a key driver of tenant dissatisfaction and complaints.</p> <p>Whilst performance against service standards post pandemic also needs to be improved, tenants are relatively tolerant of longer timescales for completing repairs providing they are kept informed.</p> <p>There are inconsistencies in the quality of Havebury's communication with tenants around repairs. Through data analysis and review of customer journey mapping, we identified gaps in tenants being kept informed of progress and not being provided with expected completion dates. Appointments are not always being made and some tenants do not feel listened to.</p> <p>We felt that authoritarian language is sometimes used in Havebury's written communication and that letters can feel impersonal. Whilst there is balance to be struck in being clear if action needs to be taken, there is a risk some letters could escalate, rather than de-escalate situations and therefore not achieve the desired outcome.</p> <p>Whilst improvements based on the above can be made, we noted however that satisfaction remains high, and complaints are relatively few. The issues identified continue to form only the minority of cases.</p> <p>Havebury's external communications to tenants are good and use a variety of channels. Efforts to better engage and inform tenants who are not online, or might otherwise struggle to access information, should continue.</p>