

FAMILY HOUSING ASSOCIATION (WALES) LTD.



**SCRUTINY PANEL REPORT
FAMILY HOUSING ASSOCIATION
COMMUNICATIONS - PART 1**

**OCTOBER 2016
NOT FOR PUBLICATION**

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BACKGROUND

BACKGROUND/CONTEXT

Karen Dugate, CEO of Family Housing, approached the scrutiny panel with a request to look into the communications between staff and tenants and to see if it could be improved. Karen specifically noted the following observations.

- That we are doing it at all!
- The media we use to communicate – face to face; letter, email, website, text, social media – as groups, as individuals
- The kind of information we need to be sharing
- The issues we need to be consulting on
- The language we use – is it accessible? Is it understandable? Is it in the correct format? Is it in the correct language?
- The most effective way of obtaining feedback on how we are performing
- What sort of profile do we have? What sort of profile do we want?
- Do we have a strong brand? Is it associated with positive or negative things?
- What do we need to do to improve?
- How do we ensure we are reaching people?

These comments cover a great number of issues and it was found to be too large an area to research each observation. Those remarks in blue are the lines we followed up with aside comments noted on the other issues. We will also give some insight into the thoughts and attitudes of the tenants receiving many of these communications.

OVERVIEW OF PROJECT

The request received by the Scrutiny Panel was to collate and gather the general feelings of tenants receiving any kind of communication, and to investigate better ways to reach the tenants and gain feedback from residents.

Unlike most reports, this is more of an observational and recipient's outlook study.

With this subject we cannot measure facts or figures and we cannot measure outcomes. But we will be able to show some of the pitfalls of communicating with a many and varied range of people from various walks of life.

METHODOLOGY

QUESTIONNAIRES

Gathering information from questions covering salient points

VISITING OTHER HOUSING ASSOCIATIONS

Understanding how other associations handle communications

MEETING THE RECIPIENTS

Visiting a number of Family Housing complexes and talking to the residents, these included:

Philadelphia Court, Morriston.

Drovers Court, Gowerton.

Princess of Wales Court, Swansea.

Swan Gardens, Swansea.

Llys Ael Y Bryn, Gorseinon.

Traherne Court, Neath Abbey

ANECDOTAL EVIDENCE

Gathering opinions and thoughts from a number of tenants

INTERVIEWS WITH VULNERABLE RESIDENTS

When requested to do so, we conducted one to one informal interviews in private with residents prone to be less confident in crowds or confined to their homes through disability, who wished to share their views.

THE SCRUTINY PANEL'S RESEARCH QUESTIONNAIRES

A questionnaire was developed so that to a great extent information was collected in a consistent manner. We composed and distributed these questionnaires to residents, whilst visiting numerous complexes, with inquiries pertinent to our remit.

VISITING OTHER HOUSING ASSOCIATIONS

We set up a visit to Newport City Homes with their Scrutiny/Challenge Panel and Tenant Engagement Officer in attendance. We compared their method of communication to see if they fared better.

MEETING THE RECIPIENTS OF COMMUNICATIONS

Meetings were held in several of Family Housing's older persons complexes in and around the Swansea area, to ask how they felt about the specific queries we had been given.

Telephone surveys were also undertaken with contacts supplied by staff of Family Housing.

ANECDOTAL EVIDENCE

The Panel collected much anecdotal evidence from residents regarding their perception of how well Family Housing were doing in relation to "Communication" Also how they felt the profile of Family Housing stood up in comparison with other RSL's in the West Wales areas.

INTERVIEWS WITH VULNERABLE RESIDENTS

We were invited by residents; through the onsite support worker to attend certain individuals who did not wish to speak out in front of their fellow residents. This was not because they wished to demean Family Housing rather that they were of a timid nature in front of crowds, but were quite willing to participate in the study.

SCRUTINY PANEL FINDINGS

GENERAL AVENUES OF COMMUNICATION

POSITIVE RESPONSES

- Personal interaction of staff on a one to one basis
- On the whole very good. One tenant's comment, however, was that "It should be remembered, they probably have not been in most prospective tenant's situations, they cannot empathise with our way of life unless they actually listen to us!"
- Pamphlets sent out with up to date data are numerous
- Text alerts seem to be worth the effort, and with technology moving as fast as it does this method should be used more
- There was evidence that maintenance reports are dealt with in prompt time

NEGATIVE RESPONSES

- Pamphlets need updating. Perhaps a few are too in depth for general consumption and not proof read before publication
- Website needs updating (our understanding is that this is in progress)
- Information from staff is usually good but some of the reports are complicated

SUMMARY

- We found that the letters sent from Family Housing are not proof read and need to be of a better quality, and that little consideration is given to the recipient
- Letters seem to be the favourite form of contact but is this because we have an older population not used to the digital world
- E-mail acceptable and should be used more, but again older population not up to date with technology
- Contractors letting Family Housing down by not corresponding with tenants regarding arrival times and dates

INFORMATION GATHERED

OVERVIEW FROM QUESTIONNAIRES

Whilst talking with residents (a total of 70) data obtained from questionnaires reveals that residents (in older persons complexes) preferred a face to face meeting with Family Housing staff, but they fully realise that this is impossible on many subjects. We should add that it tended to be the more senior residents who attended our meetings. A breakdown of the data is attached as Appendix 1.

The second choice of communication is to receive a letter from Family Housing.

The third choice of communication was the telephone.

FAMILY HOUSING LANGUAGE USE IN LETTERS

Residents preferred a piece of paper in their hand to refer back to. Many residents stated they often did not understand the communication first time, so preferred to deliberate on the written word. It was also stated that they have received numerous letters, pamphlets or leaflets but some are far too "in depth" to understand easily. Some of the letters received have an unnecessary note of threat running through them, which in the main residents objected to. Many letters contain spelling mistakes in the body of text. Some show the wrong information which residents take exception to, stating, " We obviously don't matter that much". This was a common theme with many residents asking "Do they not read these letters once they are typed" Also that letters were sometimes of an unnecessarily abrupt nature.

TELEPHONE

Many of the over 55 category do not use any technology with the exception of a mobile phone, even then, there are very few smart phones with internet connectivity therefore no capability available to view the Family Housing website. Text messaging is used by many but certainly not all of the residents. Although Family Housing has a robust programme for residents to enrol into the **digital inclusion** programme this technology still frightens many, and perhaps more emphasis should be concentrated on teaching residents better usage of their mobile phones.

Thus far the Scrutiny Panel has been unable to contact any younger residents for their views due to their information being covered by Data Protection. It is assumed that younger residents would use advancing technology much more than older tenants. The use of social media/e-mails and websites would be the media of choice amongst younger tenants.

WHAT NEEDS COMMUNICATING

Residents want communication on what is relevant to them, such as rent/repairs/maintenance. They state that some letters are full of legislation and data about subjects they have no understanding of. They would like to know what affects them without all the "legalese talk", and they want it in plain, and easy to understand language. They do not want to know what affects Family Housing, in the business world unless it is in plain straightforward words without condescension.

WHAT NEEDS CONSULTATION

Residents want communication on major changes that involve tenants or their homes such as rents/benefits/support workers hours, also on changes to their daily lives such as care packages. They expressed an interest in the direction Family Housing is moving in and what Family Housing visualise for the future.

EFFECTIVE WAYS TO GET FEEDBACK

Residents often stated that feedback was a “waste of time as nothing gets changed”. Thinking amongst residents is that telephone surveys would produce more feedback, and if you really want to gain good feedback “make it worth us doing it” i.e. rewards.

IMPROVEMENTS TO BE MADE

Head office staff’s attitude towards the tenants. Some are made to feel as if they are wasting the staff’s time, when they telephone in. Residents complained of not receiving call backs when leaving an answer phone message. They want easier access to staff (telephone/website updating). They want to know who to speak to on a particular subject and who their Housing Officer is. And they want visits from their Housing Officer to show some interest in the residents.

PROFILE

Many thought that the head office has poor street appeal, it looks dirty and tired from the outside. Many were pleased with update inside but do not like the fact that everyone can hear their business whilst talking to receptionist. We should suggest that reception staff try to discourage these conversations until the tenant is in a meeting room.

Some residents who have friends or relatives with other RSL’s think that Family Housing is better than other RSL’s which they have knowledge of, but many have had no contact with other social landlords.

OVERALL COMMENTS FROM SCRUTINY PANEL MEMBERS

A few years ago the then Service Assessors conducted an in depth review of the Housing Department's outgoing correspondence. Every letter template was reviewed and recommendations made about the tone and style of these letters. All the recommendations were accepted and outline recommendations were made regarding future correspondence. The main criticisms were the use of bold type, capitalised sentences and red type. There were also recommendations regarding the overall tone, which should be more friendly, easy to understand and less aggressive.

During the course of the Scrutiny Panel's review we have found plenty of evidence that the Service Assessors' recommendations are now being consistently ignored. We would recommend that all correspondence is again reviewed.

We note that there is no consistency in the way staff sign letters. We recommend that all signatures should contain the direct dial number and email address for the signatory and their job title.

We also note that there is little information on the Family Housing website about the structure of the organisation and we would like to see contact details and photographs of the front line staff where possible. We would also like to see on the website Family's policies, ward maps, information about new developments, self serving, live chat and instant messaging. Whilst some improvements have been made to the website, there are still many opportunities to communicate with tenants that are being missed. These are effective means of interaction that could be implemented quickly, easily and inexpensively.

We had many comments about some contractors not making appointments or when they did not keeping to them. Generally this did not apply to Westwards who were better than most.

Effective communication with tenants will always be challenging. It requires understanding of the tenant's needs, of what is important to them and of what they have a right to expect from Family Housing.

APPENDIX 1

SCRUTINY STUDY COMMENCED March 2016

Questionnaire submissions from 70 residents at complex visits.

Media used to communicate	1st choice Face to face If possible	2nd choice Letter	3rd choice Telephone After 10 a.m
Language FHA use	Complicated Far too in depth on occasions	Threatening Information 1st para, threat 2nd para Example 1	Abrupt Usages of our names not computer generated
What needs communicating	Relevant to tenants Often just filling with legislation/dates, just tell us what affects us	Changes That affect us not what affects you in simple language. Do not condescend to us.	Dwellings Anything to do with our homes. Rent/ Repairs/Maintenance
What needs consultation	Major changes Involving tenants or our homes, rents/benefits/ support workers hours.	Changed strategy Direction FHA are moving	What effects us Change to our daily lives. Care packages, support workers hours
Effective way to get feedback	Make it worth our while Don't ask for feedback when nothing gets changed	Telephone surveys	
Improvements	Staff attitude change	Easier access to staff And website updated	Telephone system Updated
Profile	Business face - Good Poor street appeal look at head office. Everyone can hear your business at reception		

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Scrutiny Panel would like to acknowledge the assistance given by Tenant Support Workers at Family Housing's Older Persons complexes in arranging meetings with their residents.

This study would not have been possible without the involvement of Family Housing's tenants and we thank them for their time and enthusiasm.

We would also like to thank Kelsie Cantelo of Newport City Homes for arranging for us to meet their Scrutiny / Challenge Panel

Thanks also to Nick Tregoning, Chair of Family Housing's Audit & Risk Committee, for his invaluable input and wealth of knowledge.

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