



Scrutiny Topic:	Customer Communications
Start Date:	September 2015
Board:	March 2016
Judgement:	1 Star: Promising Prospects for Improvement

1. Introduction

We are an interested and committed group of volunteer customers who want to improve services delivered by Great Places Housing Group (GPHG). We came together as a working group in July 2014. We currently comprise of six full-time and four part-time members. We scrutinise specific services in detail and act as a critical friend by reporting our findings and recommendations to Group Board.

2. Service Area

We decided to select 'Customer Communication' as the focus of our third scrutiny exercise, specifically 'how GPHG keep customers informed of their services, latest news, service performance and important messages. We have not focused on the communication with customers during specific service transactions (e.g. during a repair, an ASB case or recovering rent arrears). Communication on a transactional level will be included within specific service scrutiny exercises.

Customer Communication was selected for the following reasons:

- communication impacts all customers, influencing their overall experience and understanding of services delivered by GPHG
- both of our previous scrutiny reviews (Complaints and Community Safety) identified areas for improvement in relation to GPHG communicating key messages to customers
- it is important that customers are aware of the variety of services Great Places offer

3. Aims

The main aims of our scrutiny into Customer Communications are as follows:

- Assess if GPHG is providing customers with communications which are accessible, relevant and timely
- Evaluate whether the method of GPHG's communication with customers is appropriate and effective from a customer point of view

- Review GPHG's communication strategy from a customer perspective, including monitoring and delivery of the strategy

4. Objectives

The main objectives of our scrutiny into Customer Communications are as follows:

- Review if GPHG meets the requirements set out in the Tenant Involvement & Empowerment Standard relating to customer communication
- Identify examples where the principles outlined in the Communication Strategy are practically applied
- Review the opportunities customers have to influence GPHG communications
- Understand the purpose, anticipated outcomes and expectations of customer communications from both a customer and GPHG perspective
- Identify different ways customers wish to be communicated with, what they read, what they discard and why
- Review value for money of customer communication, including costs and effectiveness to meet customer needs
- Research other landlord's communications material and comment

5. Our Approach

In conducting our scrutiny of Customer Communication we completed the following activities:

- Desktop review of the; Tenant Involvement & Empowerment Standard, Communications Strategy, Communications Plans, MGP Schedule and other relevant documents
- Received a presentation from the Assistant Director and Communications Manager outlining the scope and structure of their service
- Reviewed current performance and satisfaction data held by GPHG
- Examined current customer profiling data and its use in developing appropriate customer communications
- Conducted research into five different social landlord's approach to customer communications including website and newsletters
- Interviewed 10 GPHG officers and managers, from across the group, including;
 - Assistant Director of Communications - to understand the service from a strategic level
 - Communication Manager & Communication Officer - to understand each of their roles and responsibilities on an operational level and how these contribute to delivery of the Communication Strategy
 - Customer Access Team Leader - to gain an insight of the links between the Communication Team and the contact centre
 - Environmental Manager - to understand how a key frontline service works with the Communication Team to successfully communicate with customers
 - Customer Involvement Manager - to understand how customers shape and influence Great Places communication

- Community Development Co-ordinator, Neighbourhood Co-ordinator & Neighbourhood Officer - to understand how frontline Neighbourhood Teams work with the Communication Team to communicate local news and events
- Assistant Director of Repairs & Asset Management - to understand how Repairs and Asset Management communicate key messages, performance and important information
- Commissioned the Customer Involvement Team (CIT) to conduct telephone interviews and e-surveys with customers covering key topics we had identified:
 - The CIT conducted 207 research interviews
 - We requested the respondents' age profile was similar to that of GPHG overall customer profile. The responses correlate as follows:

Age Profile	GPHG Profile	Survey Profile
16-24	4%	12%
25-49	63%	51%
50+	33%	37%

- Conducted a Mystery Shopping exercise to identify how changes to customers communication preferences are actioned by GPHG

6. Findings

When reviewing the wealth of information we collected during our activities, we reflected on our original aims for the conducting the scrutiny exercise:

Assess if GPHG is providing customers with communications which are accessible, relevant and timely:

- The MGP magazine is sent out on a regular basis, it is well designed with a wide range of content. Customer feedback regarding MGP's design and content was extremely positive, particularly from customers under 25
- The Great Places Website is easy to navigate and contains relevant, up-to-date information on a wide range of GP services
- The Customer Annual Report is eye-catching and the detailed performance information is well presented
- The Communication Team have won a number of high profile awards for communication campaigns and activity (e.g. recent award for Tribe marketing of city centre apartments)
- Great Places has a Group Communications Plan however the approach to individual service/team Communication Plans isn't consistent. We found some services/teams didn't have a specific communication plan and those we reviewed, varied in quality and detail
- A quarterly planning meeting is held with the AD's for Repairs and Housing Services to develop the 'flat plan' for the next edition of MGP
- Not all services/teams submit articles or information regularly to MGP, potentially this results in information being skewed towards teams who are most proactive. As a result, the Communication Team use resources to investigate possible stories for those services who don't submit information

- The Communication Team don't always receive the relevant level of detail and information from individual services/teams in job requests, which creates work and increases workload
- Overall frontline staff interviewed felt communications work in an ad-hoc manner, being more reactive than planned
- Great Places have a presence on social media with Twitter and Facebook profiles. The majority of output is being provided by the central communications team. Frontline services appear not to have the ability or confidence to utilise social media in their role
- GPHG currently holds 41% of customer email addresses and is unaware if the remaining customers have no address or their address has not been collected. Our Customer research suggested a significant number of customers would be interested in e-communication via email.
- The use of customer profiling information to communicate specific messages to individual groups of customers is underdeveloped
- Great Places offers a number of communication options for those with specific needs including; Braille, Magnifying Sheets, Audio CD and language translation
- When tested, we found customers' and staff's awareness of the availability of alternative communication formats was limited (specifically large print & magnifying sheets)
- When two members of 'insight' changed their customer communication preference (e.g. to large print and braille), they continued to receive communication in the standard format, there is no clear procedures to initiate alternative communication formats
- When Neighbourhood Teams issue mailshots or mass communications (e.g. standard letters, leaflets, flyers, etc.) individual communication preferences aren't taken into account
- Conflicting approaches exist regarding translating documents into alternative languages. For example, the GPHG Policy states translation is important to facilitate effective communication. However in practice, the approach is linked to Government guidance, which is not to translate and encourage learning of English

Evaluate whether the method of GPHG's communication with customers is appropriate and effective from a customer point of view

- Customers feel it is extremely important that GPHG keep them regularly informed
- Overall the majority of customers (63%) read MGP regularly, however there is a strong positive correlation between age and likelihood of having read the latest edition
- Regardless of age, MGP is the most likely method of communication customers would use to find out information regarding GPHG's services, performance and other information
- Customers are extremely positive about the design and layout of MGP, with younger customers most positive
- Customers are positive about the current content of MGP, with younger customer the most positive
- Increased local information was the main improvement stated for improving customer communications, specifically MGP
- There is also strong appetite for regular communications via email, which GPHG currently does not offer
- Social media was the least likely method customers would use to hear about services or other Great Places information, regardless of age

- Customers were involved significantly in shaping the design and content of the Customer Annual Report, this was the only example of customers being directly involved in customer communications
- Staff felt recent pilots using text messaging had provided effective in eliciting engagement from customers
- The current Communications Strategy states that GPHG will deliver 'effective communication', however, there is no consistent definition or understanding of what 'effective communication' means by managers and staff
- There is no consistent approach to understanding the success of specific communication campaigns in eliciting desired behaviour (e.g. attending an event, requesting a service, etc.). Communication Team's attempts to measure effectiveness have been hampered by the lack of feedback from service teams
- Digital screens in reception areas are not used as a platform for communicating key customer messages
- The Customer Access Team are not always made aware of information communicated to customers, which can lead to frustration when customers make follow-up enquiries

Review GPHG's communication strategy from a customer perspective, including monitoring and delivery of the strategy

- Support provided to frontline services by the Communications Team on specific campaigns has improved the quality of communication
- Training by the Communications Team to frontline services on taking quality photographs with iPhones should lead to cost savings
- The procurement and tendering of MGP production and mailing ensures value-for-money
- Effective networks have been established to share best practice and attended by Communications Team
- Frontline staff have used social media for communicating between individuals within community groups
- The current Communications Strategy is out-of-date
- There are limited Key Performance Indicators for customer communications
- Customer feedback is collected in relation to MGP but not other communication formats
- Collection of Facebook 'likes', Twitter 'followers' and Website 'hits', does not provide an understanding of engagement with customers
- There is no clear and consistent approach to social media or a social media strategy

7. Recommendations

Based on our findings above we have developed the following recommendations we feel will improve customer communication.

Proactive Planning

- Develop annual communication plans for key services and teams, incorporating a section into each plan, which outlines how and when messages to customers will be publicised

- Develop an annual content plan for MGP to ensure all relevant services and information to customers is publicised

Performance Measurement

- Define what GPHG mean by 'effective communication', specifically for customer communications
- Develop a robust range of customer focused Key Performance Indicators, KPI's which are SMART and cover all the relevant communication methods
- Increase current MGP readership targets from a low aspiration of 60%
- Develop approaches to evaluate the effectiveness of communication campaigns to reach target audiences and elicit desired behaviours
- Revise an approach to collecting satisfaction information, which is balanced for all communication methods and show results reflective of GPHG's diverse customer profile

Service Development

- Review and relaunch the Job Request process to ensure the Communications Team receive all relevant information and other services / teams are aware of the information they need to provide
- Develop a set of design templates and empower neighbourhood teams to use to promote local events without requiring input from the Communications Team
- Develop guidelines and empower service staff to use social media and GPHG's website effectively to promote messages, events, and services
- Explore the use of email communication as a regular method of keeping customers informed e.g. similar to the principle of 'Friday Bulletin' for GPHG staff members
- Develop a specific Digital Communications Strategy (or include a section within the new Communications Strategy) to demonstrate how social media and the website will be used to further enhance communications with customers; we found Bromford Housing Trust and Halton Housing Trust have a national reputation for being excellent at communicating via digital methods
- Identify opportunities to improve the working relationships, knowledge and understanding between frontline teams and Communication staff
- Utilise the self-service portal as an additional communication method to customers
- Ensure the Customer Access Team, CAT are aware of communications being sent to customers, particularly those which are likely to lead to customers contacting the team
- Investigate and explore the reason 30% of customers' who said they had not read MGP, perceived they hadn't received a copy

Equality & Diversity

- Set clear targets for increasing customer profiling data
- Clarify how teams communicate with customers whose first language is not English and revise the profiling question accordingly

- Review GPHG’s approach to providing communications to customers with known communication preferences to ensure consistent delivery of information in the required format
- Ensure changes made to customer communication preferences in the housing management system are actioned and managed throughout the customers tenancy
- Increase the promotion of alternate communication formats to customers, particularly those customers who are more likely to require these adjustments

Customer Involvement

- Increase the involvement of customers in shaping the design and content of communications for customers. For example Six Town Housing use customers to edit their monthly e-newsletter
- Consult with customers in relation to the development of a Digital Communications Strategy
- Involve customers in the earliest stage of the redevelopment of GPHG’s website
- Establish a process for customers to review and approve customer facing documents with a ‘customer approval’ stamp
- Promote widely the opportunities offered to customers to be involved to help develop, influence and shape customer communications

8. Overall Judgement

In order to provide a context to our findings and recommendations, we have developed a scoring matrix, based on six criteria, to provide an overall judgement of the current service and its prospects for improvement.

Criteria	Score
Customer Satisfaction	Weakness
Customer Service	Strength
Policy & Procedure	Weakness
Training	Weakness
Business & IT Systems	Strength
Value for Money	Strength

Using the Audit Commissions star rating system as a guideline we have awarded ‘customer communications’ at Great Place:

1 Star: Promising Prospects for Improvement

Key:

Star Rating	Description	
3 Stars	Excellent	Strengths consistently outweigh weaknesses
2 Stars	Good	Strengths outweigh weaknesses
1 Star	Satisfactory	Strengths & weaknesses are in balance
0 Stars	Poor	Weaknesses outweigh strengths

9. Acknowledgements

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