



Communications Strategy 2009 – 2011

1. Introduction to Northwards Housing

Northwards Housing is an ALMO (arms length management organisation) managing 12,500 council homes in north Manchester.

Northwards Housing has access to £200 million of extra spending to bring all housing up to the 'decent homes' standard. The Audit Commission inspected Northwards Housing's performance in November 2008 and awarded them the maximum Three Star rating.

Northwards Housing has 350 employees based in three local services offices and other specialist offices within our area in north Manchester.

This Communications Strategy outlines Northwards Housing's aims and objectives for communicating with our diverse audience. The Strategy continues to evolve develop to reflect personal preference, developments in communication technology and greater awareness of audiences.

Our Vision

The Four I's

INNOVATE – INVOLVE - IMPROVE - IMPACT

Northwards Housing will continue to contribute to **improve** north Manchester by delivering an **innovative** housing service, which **involves** all customers and stakeholders. Together we will have an **impact** on the future of our environment.

Our Values

Committed to our employees

Accountable

Our Objectives

Warm, safe and affordable homes

Successful communities

Service that is top class	Quality services
Tenant focused	Value for money
Local Services	Safer places to live
Embracing equality and diverse communities	Attractive environments
	Promote equality and diversity

2. Key communications aims and objectives

- To make sure that tenants and other customers are made aware of Northwards Housing's services and how they are being improved – using 'Plain English' or alternative media throughout.
- To continually boost and promote tenant involvement and feedback, using this constructively to improve our services.
- To increase Northwards Housing's profile as an autonomous, dependable, top performing organisation, responsible for managing north Manchester's council homes.
- To positively engage with, support and encourage employees to communicate effectively internally and externally.
- To build on existing positive and effective relationships with local, regional and national media
- To build on existing relationships with the people and groups we work with and work collaboratively for the improvement of community relationships and community cohesion.

3. Our audience

■ Tenants and leaseholders	North Manchester residents
■ Board members	Northwards employees
■ Area Panel members	Local Councillors and MPs
■ Local, regional and national media	Manchester City Council
■ Specialist and trade media	Contractors and suppliers
■ Tenant Associations and Groups	Local schools, colleges
■ Community groups & voluntary agencies	Local businesses
■ Social housing sector (inc other ALMOs)	New customers
■ General practitioners & surgeries	Faith groups
■ Resident forums	

4. Key messages

- Northwards Housing consults with, listens to and appropriately acts upon the comments of our tenants and other customers – always striving to use their feedback to deliver the best services and improvements to their homes and neighbourhoods.
- Northwards Housing supports and values employees and will encourage and take on board their opinions and ideas for service improvement.
- Northwards Housing is an autonomous, proactive organisation – open to all audiences
- Northwards Housing enjoys fruitful working relationships with the local community, media, partnership agencies and the Council and values the opportunity to build and nurture these relationships.

5. Key principles of our communications

- Consistently encouraging tenants to shape the agenda for our communications and be involved from the outset - what they say matters.
- Producing and delivering communications in formats and style that are clear, easy to read and understand, accessible to diverse audiences, encouraging and useful to audiences.
- Producing timely and relevant information for tenants and other customers, staying true to our values and objectives of being 'tenant focused', providing information that is 'value for money', 'embracing equality and diverse communities' and delivering 'top class customer services' through our communications.

6. Tools of communication

External Quarterly tenants' newsletter 'Northwards Natter'
Tenants' Handbook and service standards
Tenant DVD
Leaseholder handbook
Northwards website www.northwardshousing.co.uk
Individual branded literature (leaflets)
Press releases and media coverage
Letters and emails
Satisfaction Surveys and 'Ask Northwards'

Conferences, seminars and events
'What you said, what we've done' feedback from local offices
Information in various formats (e.g. CD, Braille, large print, community languages.)
Promotional products and displays within our public offices and at events
External and vehicle signage
Digital signage
Text messaging
Facebook / social media
Annual report
Resident involvement newsletter "Revolve"
Calendar
Northwards customer contact centre
Advertising

Internal Cascade briefings and events
Northwards' intranet
Employee newsletters (Fairground, Sty News)
Email and email broadcasts
Reports and minutes
Employee surveys
Team meetings, appraisals, one-to-one supervision
Good practice guides and procedures
Policy and Strategy documents
Performance Reports
Team away days
Employee groups (PIG, Fairground and LGBT)
Communications handbook

7. Communications in Northwards Housing

The rest of this Strategy outlines the process and methods used by Northwards Housing. This means communicating our messages to the right people at the right time and at the right price – while striving to be innovative and encouraging our audiences to get involved as part of the wider picture.

The key responsibilities of the Communications team are:

- Design, print, production and distribution of all customer literature
- Supporting internal communications with staff
- Writing and creating Northwards focused literature and newsletters
- Press and Media relations

- Website and intranet content
- Advice and support with event management
- Photography and design
- Building effective relationships with tenants and staff to improve communication
- Researching and utilising good practice from similar organisations
- Securing Value for Money from these activities
- Keeping abreast of advances in communications technology
- Awareness and development of environmentally friendly communications
- Organisation and management of the Tenant Communications Forum

8. Internal communications

Northwards Housing will support internal communications systems consistent with a culture that encourages the interest, pride and ownership of all employees; to maintain this culture, we need to involve employees.

In order for staff to feel involved, two-way communication needs to be continuous and effective. Senior staff should make themselves available, to listen and to actively encourage their team to contribute. We need to promote and build on effective leadership throughout the organisation. In a nutshell, we need to be a listening and a learning organisation.

Section six outlines a range of internal communications such as:

- employee surveys that will help us to continually reassess the aspirations, attitudes, concerns and support needs of our employees
- the intranet will generate awareness and understanding about the organisation and staff will be encouraged to become regular readers and contributors to discrete sections of the site
- shared ownership of the wider Performance Management Framework via Covalent is important. Expectations of each team need to be clear and they need to understand how their work is contributing to delivering Northwards' objectives and the organisation's performance

- there should be a strong awareness of the roles and responsibilities of individuals within the organisation with clear lines and protocols of communication
- staff will continue to be invited to become directly involved in helping to shape and deliver effective communications across the organisation
- staff will use communications to make themselves aware of training and development opportunities and to take advantage of them

Guidelines have been issued and promoted to ensure a consistent and appropriate use of Northwards' branding across the organisation. These will be kept under constant review.

9. External communications

Northwards places much importance and value in delivering tenant focused communications to our customers by:

- Ensuring that all written communications are assessed and approved by the communications forum and then given the 'tenant friendly' stamp
- Producing a quarterly newsletter with positive news stories, information about Northwards, details of local events and articles of general interest - all overseen by a communications forum of tenants who are responsible for considering and approving the content of a range of publications
- We need to ensure the website is effective in navigation, usability and accessibility, and create a high impact site that is attractive to the public. Equally we must continually review the quality and relevance of the content and measure customer satisfaction. The website is currently WC3 compliant, but the advances in technology must be observed to ensure we remain up to standard.
- To increase Northwards' presence at events
- The Tenants Handbook is on DVD and contains a series of chapters providing useful information on tenancy issues, access to services and service standards. It should be kept under constant review and sections can be added and / or updated in consultation with tenants
- To continue to develop the communication needs of leaseholders in consultation with the Leaseholder Forum and Manchester City Council.
- A protocol for establishing effective relationships with the media to actively promote Northwards and manage to mitigate the impact of any negative news stories
- A survey of tenants' satisfaction with the service will be undertaken each year as well as a number of more targeted and service specific surveys. The number of surveys sent out to tenants each year will be coordinated and controlled in order to maximise the greatest return and avoid 'survey fatigue'.
- Service standards will be monitored to ensure face-to-face and telephone communication is consistent and of a high quality

- Written communication such as letters or reports will be subject to regular quality checks to ensure they are of a high standard, consistent, written in a professional tone and in plain English.
- Complaints will be valued and handled sensitively, within target times to ensure that lessons are learned.
- Staff will have access to additional resources to assist with translations (The Big Word)
- Local offices will be welcoming, appropriately signed and provide access to a range of information via posters, leaflets, freephone to the customer contact centre and access to a private interview room.

10. Accessible communications

All of Northwards' publications will be available in a range of formats (i.e. on DVD, Braille, CD and large print on request and within reason) They can also be made available in nine community languages – Albanian, Czech, Chinese, French, Kurdish, Portuguese, Somali and Urdu plus other languages if requested.

Northwards Housing is committed to providing services to customers in accordance with its **Equality and Diversity Policy**. In order to achieve this we will:

- Publicise our commitment to providing equality and diversity in service delivery
- Provide training and guidance to staff on a regular basis on changes to the law and our policy
- Provide training for staff, Area Panel and Board members to raise awareness of customers needs from different backgrounds and how to respond to them
- Review performance against Equality and Diversity targets

11. Relationship with Manchester City Council

Northwards will work in partnership with Manchester City Council and ensure effective working protocols are in place so that our communications are timely and consistent with the Council's Housing and Community Strategies. This will be supportive of the wider framework for the regeneration of north Manchester and may include joint or shared communications as appropriate. Northwards will comply with the legal requirements concerning communications and publicity during the period of local elections and regularly review the current Service Level Agreements (SLAs) between Northwards Housing and Manchester City Council to ensure future services are of a high quality, offer value for money and continue to meet the needs and priorities of the organisation.