



## Report to:

Northwards Housing Board

12 October 2006

## Item No:

# 10b

<b>Title:</b>	Communications Strategy		
<b>Date:</b>	2 October 2006		
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<b>Confidential:</b>	No		
<b>For:</b> (Please tick action required)	<b>NOTING</b>	<b>DISCUSSION</b>	<b>APPROVAL</b> √

### PURPOSE OF REPORT

To ask the Board to approve a Communications Strategy for Northwards Housing.

### RECOMMENDATION

That the Board approve the Communications Strategy.

### IMPLICATIONS

<b>Equality &amp; Diversity:</b>	An effective Communications Strategy will enhance Northwards' capacity to engage effectively and appropriately with different groups.
<b>Financial:</b>	None directly arising from this report.
<b>Staffing:</b>	None directly arising from this report; but improving communications will help improve staff recruitment and retention.
<b>Decency Target:</b>	None directly arising from this report.
<b>Governance:</b>	Effective communication supports good governance and promotes resident involvement in service improvement and decision-making.
<b>Risk Assessment:</b>	No new risk created or primary risk affected.

**Equality & Diversity Implications** (Please tick where relevant):

BME	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Transgender	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Elderly	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Single Parents	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Young	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Domestic Violence	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Disability	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Alcohol / Drug Mis-users	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

**Consultation/Consideration:**

	<b>Yes, No or N/A:</b>	<b>Name:</b>	<b>Date:</b>
<b>Sub-Committee:</b>	Yes	Performance & Quality Services	22 September 2006
<b>Area Panel:</b>	No		
<b>Task Groups:</b>	No		
<b>Ward Councillors:</b>	No		

**1. Background**

- 1.1 In order to ensure that Northwards Housing communicates effectively with its diverse audiences, both internal and external, it is considered helpful to have a Communications Strategy which sets out our aims and objectives in this regard and how we intend to achieve them. The attached strategy is intended to do that.
- 1.2 The strategy was considered by the Performance and Quality Services Sub-Committee meeting on 22 September 2006. The Sub-Committee suggested a number of amendments, and recommended that the Board approve the strategy subject to those amendments having been made. The strategy now before the Board incorporates those amendments.
- 1.3 It is intended that progress with implementing the strategy will be monitored by way of regular updates to the Performance and Quality Services Sub-Committee, Area Panels and Task Groups.

**2. Recommendations**

That the Board approve the Communications Strategy.

# Communications Strategy 2006-2008

## 01. Introduction to Northwards Housing

Northwards Housing is an ALMO (arms length management organisation) managing 13,000 council homes in north Manchester and delivering over £200 million of investment to bring all the homes up to the government's Decent Homes Standard target by 2010, subject to a successful outcome of the Audit Commission Inspection in June 2006. We are a not-for-profit organisation, set up by Manchester City Council in December 2005.

Northwards Housing (NH) has nearly 300 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 audiences. The Strategy will continually evolve and be developed in consultation with residents.

### Mission Statement

Brought to life by the resounding YES vote of North Manchester's council tenants, we are here to build on their trust by delivering the excellent standard of housing service residents deserve and desire.

Our service will be successful, responsive to tenants and driven by our can-do outlook. It will win us the extra funding needed to improve tenants' homes, and the wider environment – up to and beyond the 'decent homes' standard.

We share this commitment to the future of social housing in North Manchester with our residents and the Council, as we work in partnership to make our communities safe and sustainable. We respect each other - tenants, staff and partners, celebrating the diversity of our communities and workforce. Together we will help to renew North Manchester.

#### Values

- Top Class Customer Service
- Local Services
- Embracing Equality & Diverse Communities
- Tenant Focused
- Committed to our Employees
- Accountable

#### Objectives

- Warm, Safe and Affordable Homes
- Successful Communities
- Quality Services
- Value for Money
- Safer places to live
- An Attractive Environment
- Promote Equality and Diversity

## 02. Key communications aims and objectives

- To ensure that tenants and other customers are made aware of Northwards Housing's services and how they are being improved – using 'Plain English' throughout.
- To continually boost and promote resident involvement and feedback, using this constructively to improve our services.
- To increase Northwards Housing's profile as a top performing organisation, responsible for managing North Manchester's council homes.
- To positively engage with, support and encourage staff members to communicate effectively internally and externally.
- To build effective relationships with local, regional and national media
- To build and develop new and existing relationships with tenants, tenant and resident groups, staff, community groups, partnership agencies, the Council, local businesses, voluntary organisations and other audiences - working collaboratively for the improvement of community relationships and community cohesion.

## 03. Our audiences

- Tenants and leaseholders
- Board members
- Area Panel members
- Local, regional and national media
- Specialist and trade media
- Tenant Associations and Groups
- Community groups & voluntary agencies
- Social housing sector (inc other ALMOs)
- General practitioners & surgeries
- Housing applicants
- Focus groups
- North Manchester residents
- Northwards staff members
- Local Councillors and MPs
- Manchester City Council
- Contractors and suppliers
- Local schools, colleges
- Local businesses
- Housing specialists
- Faith groups
- Task groups
- Forums

## 04. 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 its staff and will 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.

## 05. Key principles of our communications

- Consistently encouraging residents to steer the agenda for our communications and be involved from the outset. What they say matters.
- Producing and delivering communications in formats and styles that are clear, easy to read and understand, and accessible to diverse audiences.
- Producing timely and relevant information to 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.

## 06. Tools of communication

<b>External</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Quarterly tenants' newsletter</li> <li>Tenants' Handbook and service standards</li> <li>Northwards website <a href="http://www.northwardshousing.co.uk">www.northwardshousing.co.uk</a></li> <li>Individual branded literature (leaflets)</li> <li>Press releases and media coverage</li> <li>Letters and emails</li> <li>Surveys and 'Ask Northwards'</li> <li>Conferences, seminars and events</li> <li>'What you said, what we've done' feedback from local offices</li> <li>Information on various formats (e.g. audio tape, Braille, large print etc.</li> <li>DVD web broadcasts)</li> <li>Promotional products and displays</li> </ul>
<b>Internal</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Staff briefings and events</li> <li>Northwards' intranet</li> <li>Employee newsletter</li> <li>Email and email broadcasts</li> <li>Communications Champions scheme</li> <li>Reports and minutes</li> <li>Staff surveys and Memos</li> <li>Team meetings, appraisals, one-to-one's and briefings</li> </ul>

Good practice guides and procedures  
Policy and Strategy documents  
Performance Reports  
Senior managers, line managers and good practice forums

## 07. 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 staff 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

## 08. Internal communications

Northwards Housing will develop internal communications systems to develop a new culture, with a focus on encouraging the interest, pride and ownership of all Northwards staff.

To create this culture, we need to involve staff right from the start - keeping them informed, using the right techniques. We can't expect staff to fit into this culture, without knowing the organisation as a whole.

In order for staff to feel involved, two-way communication needs to be a priority. Senior staff should make themselves available, to listen and to actively encourage their team to contribute. We also 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 5 above outlines a range of internal communications such as:

- **staff surveys** that will allow us to assess 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 the site
- shared ownership of the wider **Performance Management Framework** is important. Expectations of each team need to be clear and they need to understand how their work is contributing to 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 of communication
- **staff will 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 will be issued and promoted to ensure a consistent and appropriate use of Northwards' branding across the organisation.

## 09. External communications

Northwards places much importance and value in delivering customer-focused communications by:

- Producing a **quarterly newsletter** with positive news stories, information about Northwards, details of local events and articles of general interest - all overseen by an editorial group of tenants and staff who will be 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
- To increase Northwards' presence at **events**
- The **Tenants Handbook** contains a series of leaflets providing useful information on tenancy issues, access to services and service standards. It should be kept under constant review and leaflets will be added and / or updated in consultation with tenants
- **Community Sponsorship scheme** – approved by the Board in September 2006
- Explore the communication needs of **leaseholders** in consultation with the Leaseholder Forum and Manchester City Council.
- A protocol for establishing effective **relationships with the press** to actively promote Northwards and manage and reduce the impact of any negative news stories
- A **survey of tenants' satisfaction** with the service will be undertaken each year as well as several more targeted and service specific surveys as appropriate. The number of surveys sent out to tenants each year will be managed and controlled in order to achieve the greatest return
- **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. Written **Complaints** will be handled sensitively, within target times and taken seriously to ensure that lessons are learned. Particular care will be taken to ensure that **technical information** is communicated in a way which is easy for a non-specialist audience to understand.
- Staff will have access to additional resources to assist with **translations** (e.g. interpreters and 'language line.')
- **Local offices** will be welcoming, appropriately signed and provide access to a range of information via posters, leaflets, freephone to On Call and access to a private interview room.

## 10. Accessible communications

All of Northwards' publications will be available in a range of formats (i.e. different languages, on DVD, Braille, Audio Tape and large print.) These will be available in all nine community languages – Arabic, Chinese, Farsi, French, Hindi, Kurdish, Somali, Urdu and Vietnamese. To ensure value for money, information in these other languages will be available by request on a case by case basis. As customer profiling information is collated this information will be reviewed to ensure it accurately reflects the customer base.

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 the law and the organisation's policy
- Provide training for staff, area panel and Board members to raise cultural awareness and the needs of customers from different backgrounds
- 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 Strategy and Community Strategy. These will be supportive of the wider framework for the regeneration of North Manchester. This 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 review the current Service Level Agreements (SLAs) between Northwards Housing and Manchester City Council to ensure future services are of a high quality and offer value for money.

## 08. a: Internal communications annual action plan and evaluation

Action	Timescale	Lead	Evaluation
Northwards style guide and corporate standards to be produced and agreed by communications group and EMT. To publicise to all staff via the intranet.	March 2007	LM	All staff aware of protocols in communicating with external customers, including design, branding, terms of expression and appropriate communication
Northwards email policy to be revised/re-launched and publicised on the intranet and at staff briefing	February 2007		Collective and uniform use of email to create and encourage unity and corporate style
Database of Northwards customers preferred method of communication (languages/audio/Braille etc) to be developed, updated regularly and made available on the intranet for all staff	December 2006	OS/JB	All staff using the same information, building trust with tenants and customers. Ability to be proactive and prepare preferred communication formats in advance.
Quarterly staff newsletter contributions to be gathered via communication champions, team meetings and staff briefings. To produce staff newsletter on a more regular basis in 2007 and make available via the intranet.	January 2007	LM	Staff feel encouraged to share their news, improving staff relations
To create a regularly updated forward planning calendar on the intranet – listing internal and external events, meetings, briefings, key dates.	January 2007	LM	Staff know what is happening in and around Northwards, building good internal communication. Staff are encouraged to take part.
Develop Communications Champions editorial, to meet separately from the tenants editorial group –	September 2006	LM	Staff take more ownership and pride in communications

Action	Timescale	Lead	Evaluation
where staff can contribute ideas and material for the tenants and staff newsletter			
Reach for the stars staff incentive scheme to be published in the staff newsletter.	September 2006	LM	To develop the knowledge that staff are appreciated and acknowledged
Implement innovative pay slip messages – offering discounts for staff, motivational messages, key dates to remember etc	January 2007	LM/AF	More than just a payslip!
To produce post inspection staff survey – to assess the individual needs of staff including training, appraisals, work load, job satisfaction, suggestions etc.	January 2007	LM/LMc	Staff feel valued
Staff appraisals	October 2006	All managers	Annual
Induction programme for new staff to be revised with more structure, information and support network		LMc	New starters feel welcomed and assured
Board and Area Panels to be sent staff newsletter	September 2006	LM	Board can give 'fresh' feedback
Communications training for staff to be developed and delivered. How to write effectively, how to use Northwards branding. How we address equality and diversity in our communications. The why's and how's of effective communication.	February 2007	LM/OS	Staff to produce unified correspondence and increase confidence in communications
To relaunch staff notice board on the intranet - publicising personal events, sponsorships, birthdays, celebrations, daily musings, items for sale etc	February 2007	LM	Increased awareness of colleagues creating a happier workforce
To set up and maintain a 'useful contacts for staff'	October	SF/JB	Staff know they can get contact details

Action	Timescale	Lead	Evaluation
database on the intranet – all other staff and offices, council contacts, press, tenants, partnership agencies, TA's and TARA's etc	2006		at a click. Saving time and increasing communication channels.
To create a user friendly form for staff (who are in regular contact with tenants) to identify and relate good news stories to the Communications Officer	October 2006	LM	Communications Officer can take advantage of fresh stories to gain positive media coverage

## 09 a: External communications action plan and evaluation

Action	Timescale	Lead	Evaluation
<b>Tenant's handbook and literature</b>			
Leaflets in the tenant's handbook to be consulted on with all tenants via Area Panels, the Board, TA surveys, the tenant's newsletter and appeal posters in local area offices. Consult on readability, lack of / too much / usefulness of information, accessibility and overall feel. To revise literature accordingly.	Ongoing consultation - to look at reproducing September 2007	LM	Tenants know that their opinions and recommendations have been taken into account – with the tenant 'stamp' of approval.
Have the tenant approved 'stamp' designed and approved for inclusion in future print runs of leaflets and literature	Summer 2007	LM	Tenants are assured that information has been approved by other tenants

Action	Timescale	Lead	Evaluation
Leaflets to be published on Northwards website. Separate page to be created and publicised on home page	Sept '06	LM	Increased accessibility
To send replacement customer complaints forms to tenants, once they have used the form in the handbook	January 2007	SK	Tenants acknowledged and opinion valued. Create culture of learning from complaints
<b>Tenant's newsletter</b>			
Tenant's newsletter to be produced quarterly with new input from the tenant editorial group.	June 2006	LM	Tenants receive a continually improving newsletter, approved and led by tenants from the Board and Area Panels
Decide and agree on a forward planning calendar for the tenant newsletter and create a set of guidelines for future contributors (timescales, appropriate contributions)	June 2006	LM	Developed style and procedure promotes structure, planned, proactive approach
Produce a religious festivals and events calendar for use by staff and external customers demonstrating the organisations commitment to equality and diversity and inclusive culture.	December 2006	LM	Increase levels of awareness and understanding. Promotes Northwards Housing.
To build and develop working relationships with partnership agencies - including in the newsletter and relevant publications. Agreeing appropriate contra-deals to work collaboratively.	March 2007	LM	Shared network in north Manchester promotes inclusion and reciprocal work
To explore avenues of cutting costs of communication by including relevant direct mail, tenant surveys, external agency literature etc in each newsletter.	December 2006	LM	Value for money, targeted communications
<b>Website</b>			

Action	Timescale	Lead	Evaluation
'Ask the Board' questions and answers to be featured and regularly updated on the website	September 2006	DR	Tenants are taken seriously and listened to
'Local news' page to be created on the website, inviting tenants and customers to advertise their events and news to the public	March 2007	LM	Improved tenant involvement
Increase the profile of the news section, including press releases and pictures	March 2007	LM	Lively, topical, local, relevant
<b>Press and media</b>			
To produce at least two press releases a month	January 2007	LM	Promotes and increases Northwards' profile
To develop and implement Northwards press and media protocols (style, length, quotes, legal, contacts)	November 2006	LM	Ensure clear channels of communication and build the reputation of Northwards
Use staff and tenants to identify good news stories, using short proforma (who, what, where, when, why format)	October 2006	LM	Builds consistency for press and builds skills of staff
Develop and cultivate press and media relations, especially trade and regional	March 2007	LM	Increases profile of Northwards and reduces risk of negative news stories
To build and maintain press cuttings file, circulating press coverage to EMT, SMT, the Board and Area Panels	March 2006	LM	Evidence for future inspection or external audit
<b>Equality and diversity</b>			
To analyse results of customer profile surveys and decide on key languages in the Northwards area for inclusion in communications	March 2007	LM OS E&D officer	Ensure communications are appropriate, relevant and reflect customer profile

Action	Timescale	Lead	Evaluation
The same groups to decide on which pieces of literature are to be translated and made accessible to deaf and visually impaired customers	March 2007	E&D officer SMT EMT	
<b>Photography</b>			
To continue to build and develop a diverse library of in-house and professional photographs, illustrating and representing the diversity of our audiences	September 2006	LM Business Support	Ensure good representation of tenants, customers and their neighbourhoods
<b>Local area offices</b>			
'You say, we've done' board suggestions to be collected and logged on a weekly basis and responded to appropriately. Questions and answer board to be updated every three weeks by local area office managers and staff.	June 2006	Local Area office managers	Listening to feedback, learning from complaints and improving the service.