

Report for Cheltenham Borough Homes

Communication Strategy

August 2002

Communications Strategy

1. Introduction

Cheltenham Borough Council (CBC) is seeking to set up an Arms Length Management Organisation (ALMO) to manage its housing stock. The ALMO will be known as Cheltenham Borough Homes (CBH). The ownership of the housing stock will stay with CBC and that means that there will be no change of landlord for tenants. There will of course be a change of management, and a change of employer for many members of staff. Since CBH will be wholly owned by CBC and staffed by the people who currently provide the housing service, the impact of change for both tenants and staff should be minimised.

Timescales

The timescales are:

submission of section 27 document to the Government by early December 2002

CBH goes live in January -March 2003

the Housing Inspectorate starts its review 6 months later ie in July- September 2003

the results of the inspection are known and (assuming at least a 2* grading is received) the additional funding is available in 3 months ie from October 2003 onwards.

Tenant Support

Before CBH can take over management of the Council's housing stock, the Government's permission is required under section 27 of the Housing Act 1985. CBC will have to satisfy a number of criteria to gain that permission, including demonstrating that tenants are generally in favour of the new arrangements. Therefore the main focus of the communication strategy will be to demonstrate tenant support for CBH.

Unlike stock transfer, where tenant support is generally demonstrated via a ballot following a period of statutory consultation, there is no statutory requirement to consult tenants about an ALMO and councils have the option whether to ballot tenants or not. CBC has decided not to ballot tenants, but to use other methods of consultation instead. It will be important for CBC to communicate with tenants to inform them about CBH and to test their support.

Other Stakeholders

For most staff in Housing Services, CBH will mean a change of employer. CBH will be a separate legal entity in its own right and staff will transfer from the Council to CBH under TUPE (Transfer of Undertakings Protection of Employment Legislation). Staff are bound to have concerns about what CBH will mean for them and it will be important to communicate with staff to allay their concerns as well as to build support for CBH.

Staff in other departments will be interested in CBH, particularly if it will impact on their future working relations with former colleagues.

Members will be interested in the corporate impact of CBH as well as the impact on the housing service specifically.

Other stakeholders who have a relationship with Housing Services eg Members of Parliament, will also be interested in the new management arrangements.

Communications Strategy

2. The Strategy

This document sets out the approach and methods which can be used to develop an effective communications strategy. It aims to meet the requirements of tenants, staff and members from now until the submission of the section 27 document in November. Following the approval of the Shadow Board to this overall approach on 5 August, CBC will produce a programme of communication activities (outlined in the Cabinet report).

Objectives

The objectives of the strategy are:

- to provide tenants with relevant information about CBH
- to provide staff who are likely to transfer to CBH information about what this will mean for them
- to provide other staff with information about CBH
- to provide members with information about CBH
- to make other stakeholders aware of CBH and how it may affect their relationship with Housing Services.

Methods

There are a number of tried and tested communication methods which can be used. Some are more effective than others and they are discussed below. The key issues to consider when deciding which methods to use are:

- who is the target audience?
- how do they prefer to communicate?
- what messages are you trying to deliver?
- do you want feedback?
- cost versus benefits.

3. Communicating with Tenants

Meetings

Public meetings are often used to try and communicate with a large number of people at once. They are often poorly attended and can be disrupted by individuals pursuing their own agendas. Smaller meetings which are restricted to particular groups of people eg tenants in a sheltered housing complex, can work better than larger, open meetings because it is possible to make them more relevant to the audience.

Costs of meetings include staff time and venue hire. Transportation and crèche facilities are optional costs.

Focus Groups

These are special meetings which aim to gather the views of particular types of people. They are often used by market research companies because they allow the researcher to obtain highly specific feedback and information from a target client group. For example, if you wanted to

Communications Strategy

know the views of young single mothers, then you could set up a focus group of that type of tenant.

Sometimes the focus groups meet more than once. This allows the researcher to build up a working relationship with the interviewees and to discuss issues in greater depth. To take the previous example, the first focus group of young single mothers might identify safe play areas for children as a priority for them. The next meeting might discuss possible locations and the kinds of play equipment they would like to have included in the play areas.

The costs comprise staff time and venue hire. Transportation and crèche facilities might also be provided. It is customary for focus group members to receive some kind of token payment for their participation eg a £10 shopping voucher.

Independent Tenant Advisor

Solon have been appointed to advise tenants about the implications of CBH for them and regular meetings with the advisor should help CBH to communicate with tenants.

Costs include Solon's fees and staff time.

Newsletters

People like to receive information in a written format and newsletters are commonly used to provide information on a regular basis. It is important that the newsletters are attractive and interesting to read and tailored to suit the target audience. This means that they should be available translated into community languages or Braille and possibly, large print.

Another method of encouraging people to read the newsletters is to have competitions/quizzes in them. For example, readers could be asked questions which can only be answered by reading the text.

Rather than producing long and detailed newsletters, it is worth developing a series of them, each covering a different topic.

Costs will include the time to write the copy for the newsletters, photographs, printing/photocopying, postage and possibly competition prizes.

Other Written Communications

Other forms of written communication include leaflets and posters. These can be used effectively to put across key messages in a concise form. The leaflets and posters can be distributed widely eg to all Council premises.

Personal letters can also be used to communicate with tenants. People are more likely to read a letter addressed to them by name rather than a general mailshot.

Costs will comprise copy writing, design and printing.

Media

Local newspapers can be a good way of informing tenants about what is going on. Press releases, advertisements, articles and the letters page can be used to provide information. Sometimes the press can be more of a hindrance than a help: negative editorials, letters and other articles can misinform and detract from the key positive messages. The ALMO should avoid entering into damaging public debates on negative issues no matter how strong the provocation.

Communications Strategy

Local radio can also be used: both free airtime eg news stories and purchased airtime eg “infomercials”.

It is worth trying to foster good working relations with the local media and a press/media launch can be used to start the process off. The aim of the launch is to raise awareness of what CBH is all about and to establish contact so that the media know who to contact to check facts or to obtain comments. This should be followed up by regular press releases.

Costs will comprise venue hire and refreshments for the launch, writing time and copying costs for the press releases.

Interviews/Face to Face Communication

The most effective form of communication is one to one and face to face. This gives the opportunity for people to ask questions and receive answers about the issues that matter to them. It also gives the opportunity to check that people fully understand the information received by other means. It is customary to make a special payment to staff involved in door knocking if they do so outside normal working hours.

Costs will include staff time and any overtime payments to staff.

Surveys

Statistically valid surveys are a recognised method of obtaining useful information about tenant views and aspirations. They can be carried out by telephone, post or face to face. The last method yields the best results, but it is more expensive than the others.

Since the Council is not planning to ballot tenants about CBH, a survey is a good and acceptable alternative to obtaining tenants views. It also offers the opportunity for the Council to ask questions about a range of issues in addition to CBH choice.

Costs will include questionnaire design, testing, survey and analysis.

Web Site

More and more people are using the internet to access information. The Council already has a web site and this could be developed to include specific information about CBH. The site could also have the facility for feedback.

Costs will comprise the redesign and updating of the web site.

Other

There are many other ways to communicate with tenants eg display stands in shopping centres, attendance at community events, attendance at tenant and resident group meetings.

4. Communicating with Staff

Where possible, existing communication methods should be used to communicate with staff so that information about CBH is part of the normal communication exchange. The following methods may not be needed if alternatives are already in place.

Staff Adviser

It is common for an independent adviser to be appointed to advise staff about their rights, particularly pensions. Alternatively, the Council could provide this advice itself.

Costs will comprise the adviser’s fee or the relevant staff member’s time.

Communications Strategy

Team Briefings

Staff are bound to feel some anxiety about the proposed change of employer and people tend to feel more anxious if they believe that things are happening that they are unaware of, even if there is no real cause for them to be alarmed. It is essential that regular communication takes place with staff, even if just to tell people that nothing substantive has happened since the last update. There are no issues of commercial confidentiality here and so, other than matters which are personally sensitive to staff eg sickness record, CBH should seek to be as open as possible about its plans. To date a mixture of team briefings, larger group training events and newsletters have been used with CBC Housing staff.

Small meetings tend to work better than large meetings and staff often feel more comfortable being briefed alongside their immediate colleagues. It also means that the briefing can be tailored to suit the individual staff groups, for example, staff who will not be transferring to CBH will have different interests from the transferring staff.

Regular meetings should also be held with union representatives.

Costs will comprise staff time, and the costs of a personnel advisor on specific issues concerning TUPE.

Individual Interviews

As well as the team briefings, staff should be encouraged to speak to senior ALMO/Council staff if they have any issues they would like to discuss on an individual basis.

Costs will comprise staff time.

Newsletters

Staff newsletters can be used to keep staff informed and up to date.

Costs will comprise copy writing, production and issue.

Intranet

The Council's intranet site could be used to keep staff up to date and to invite regular feedback.

Costs will include site development and maintenance.

Working Groups

Staff should be encouraged to become involved in the development of CBH plans and working groups could be established to deal with different issues eg communication.

Costs will include staff time.

Staff Event

To launch CBH, a staff event could be held. This would allow the staff to meet the Shadow Board and CBH project team. It would also help establish CBH as an important and positive new initiative. Staff have indicated their preference for this to happen in January, prior to transfer.

Costs will include venue hire, refreshments and staff time.

Communications Strategy

5. Communicating with Other Stakeholders

Members and other stakeholders eg MPs and local RSLs will be interested in CBH. Members will be informed as part of the normal reporting process, but some members may want to find out more about what is happening. Individual member interviews could be offered and/or special member briefing sessions could be organised.

Costs will mainly be limited to staff time.

As far as other stakeholders are concerned, a letter is a good way of letting them know what is being proposed and CBH could offer to meet with them if required. Much of the communication material produced for tenants should be available to the public eg leaflets and posters in libraries and leisure centres, and that is usually sufficient.

Costs are likely to be restricted to staff time, printing and postage.

6. Conclusions

Before CBC can set up CBH officially, it requires Government approval under section 27 of the Housing Act 1985. This means that CBC will need to demonstrate that tenants support the initiative.

The main focus of the communication strategy will be to inform tenants about CBH and to gain their support. It will also be important to keep staff, members and other stakeholders informed.

This document describes a number of different methods which can be used to communicate with stakeholders. It has been approved by the Shadow Board of CBH as general guidance on acceptable communication methods.