

# Scrutiny of Housing Associations' Policies and Procedures Relating to Communication with Customers, Elected Members and Council Officers: Project Plan

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## 1. Purpose of the Scrutiny Exercise

This scrutiny exercise seeks to examine how housing associations operating within East Herts communicate with their customers and with the council. The aims are to identify:

1. areas for improvement by housing associations and/or the council
2. examples of best practice that can be shared among housing associations
3. potential issues for lobbying national bodies, such as regulators or government, to improve housing association communications.

The findings and recommendations will be presented to the Executive Member for Neighbourhoods for consideration.

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## 2. Scope of the Review

### *In Scope*

The review will examine the mechanisms, policies and procedures that housing associations use to communicate with:

- customers (tenants, leaseholders, shared owners)
- elected members
- council officers.

Specific areas to be explored include:

- comments, compliments and complaints arrangements
- out-of-hours and emergency contact arrangements
- how communication channels are publicised by housing associations to their customers and the council
- the role housing associations believe elected members and officers should play in representing or advocating for customers' concerns.

### *Out of Scope*

The handling of specific individual complaints is excluded from this review.

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## 3. Methodology

The scrutiny process will follow three phases.

## Phase A – Fact-Finding and Evidence Gathering

- A questionnaire will be issued to all housing associations with properties in East Herts.
- A task-and-finish group will be established to gather further expert evidence (in writing or via in-person/online sessions).

## Phase B – Recommendation Formulation

- Survey results and evidence will be analysed by the task-and-finish group to identify key findings and proposed recommendations.

## Phase C – Reporting

- A report will be presented to Overview and Scrutiny Committee (O&S) containing recommendations for the Executive Member for Neighbourhoods.

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## 4. Timeline and Responsibilities

When	What	Lead Responsibility
<b>Aug – Sept</b>	Draft questionnaire for housing associations	Katherine Gilcreest (KG), Assistant Director for Housing and Rupert Brandon (RB), Interim Housing Strategy & Development Lead
	Approve questionnaire	Approval via either (a) email sign-off from Cllrs Horner, Jacobs and Nicholls or (b) decision at O&S on 16 Sept. Approval route to be confirmed by Cllrs Horner, Jacobs, Nicholls
<b>Sept – Oct</b>	Distribute questionnaire and monitor/chase responses	Peter Mannings (PM), Acting Scrutiny Officer
<b>Sept – Dec</b>	Establish task-and-finish group	Approval sought by Cllr Nicholls at O&S on 16 Sept. Membership to be agreed at O&S or immediately thereafter. Report to be drafted by Jonathan Geall (JG), Director for Communities & KG
	Hold three task-and-finish group meetings: 1. gather evidence 2. gather further evidence 3. reflect on evidence and draft recommendations	Members supported by officers; KG & PM to arrange for expert witnesses
<b>Nov</b>	Update O&S on progress (4 Nov meeting)	Cllr Nicholls (or task group chair); report to be drafted by JG & KG; PM to invite Cllr Goldspink
<b>Jan</b>	Task group recommendations considered by O&S	Cllr Nicholls (or task group chair) to present; report to be drafted by JG & KG; PM to invite Cllr Goldspink

## **5. Possible 'Expert Witnesses'**

The O&S Committee and/or the task-and-finish group will finalise who they would like to gather evidence from. At the onset, members have already expressed an interest in the following 'expert witnesses':

- local housing associations, possibly focusing on the two with most stock in East Herts – Clarion and SNG
- the Housing Ombudsman and/or Social Housing Regulator
- a nearby stock-holding local authority
- Citizens Advice East Herts.

## **6. Expected Outcomes**

The scrutiny exercise will result in recommendations approved by the O&S Committee for the consideration of the Executive Member for Neighbourhoods. It is expected that the recommendations will cover, though they will not be limited to:

- ways to improve communication processes between housing associations and customers, elected members and council officers
- best practices for that can be promote across the social housing sector in East Herts by the council
- possible issues that the council may wish to lobby nationally for in relation to regulatory or policy changes that could improve housing association communication.

**Jonathan Geall**

Director for Communities

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