



## CAERPHILLY HOMES TASK GROUP – 30TH JUNE 2016

**SUBJECT: COMMUNICATIONS ACTION PLAN UPDATE**

**REPORT BY: CORPORATE DIRECTOR - COMMUNITIES**

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### **1. PURPOSE OF REPORT**

- 1.1 To provide Project Board members with an update on delivery of the Caerphilly Homes Communications Strategy action plan.

### **2. SUMMARY**

- 2.1 Effective communications is essential to ensuring all stakeholders have an awareness of the Caerphilly Homes brand, are aware of the services we deliver and are kept up to date on progress across the housing division. Key to effective communications is the delivery of timely messages in a range of formats, suitable to specific target audiences. But, more than simply sending messages out, effective communication also relies upon creating opportunities for open and transparent two way dialogue with stakeholders.
- 2.2 In May 2015 a revised Communications Strategy for Caerphilly Homes was developed in conjunction with tenants and officers. The strategy advocates a 'one housing service' approach to communications in order to more effectively embed the Caerphilly Homes ethos throughout the division.
- 2.3 A considerable amount of work has taken place over the past year to raise the Caerphilly Homes profile and build a positive reputation amongst stakeholders. As a flagship programme for the council, significant effort has been made to promote the WHQS programme and to increase stakeholder engagement.

### **3. LINKS TO STRATEGY**

- 3.1 The Welsh Housing Quality Standard (WHQS) is intended to ensure that all local authority and housing association homes are improved and maintained to achieve specified standards.
- 3.2 The WHQS investment in Council Homes to transform lives and communities is a Well Being Objective.
- 3.3 The Council's Local Housing Strategy "People, Property, and Places" has the following aim:  
"To provide good quality, well managed houses in communities where people want to live, and offer people housing choices which meet their needs and aspirations."
- 3.4 Other relevant internal strategies include the corporate communications strategy 'One Voice' and Caerphilly Homes' local tenant participation strategy.
- 3.5 The WHQS investment in Council homes to transform lives and communities is a Well Being Objective.

## 4. THE REPORT

- 4.1 A communications review was undertaken in May 2015 which highlighted a number of areas for improvement including the need for greater consistency and coverage across the housing division, along with the need to further embed the Caerphilly Homes ethos and brand. In order to achieve this, the strategy and associated action plan takes a 'one housing service' approach to the delivery of communications.
- 4.2 As well as publicity and the promotion of services, including the WHQS programme, the strategy also includes a focus upon the development of opportunities for effective engagement and two way dialogue with stakeholders. A considerable amount of the work that has been carried out over the past year has been to increase the opportunities for more informal communication and engagement with stakeholders.
- 4.3 The key aims of the strategy are:
- (i) To raise the awareness of stakeholders on:
    - The range of services we provide
    - How to access our services
    - Our performance in providing these services
    - How they can influence our services
  - (ii) To promote Caerphilly Homes' reputation locally, regionally and nationally.
  - (iii) To develop a consistent brand image and positive identity for Caerphilly Homes.
- 4.4 The Communications Action Plan (Appendix A) sets out the shorter term actions to deliver the aims of the strategy. The action plan was developed based upon SMART principles to ensure it could be delivered, measured and monitored effectively.
- 4.5 Narrative has been added to the plan in order to reflect progress made in its delivery over the past year, along with colour coding to show the current status of each action against the timescales specified within the plan.
- 4.6 The twice yearly newsletter sent to all Caerphilly Homes tenants and leaseholders has continued. In order to ensure continuous improvement, tenants are actively engaged in providing feedback on the newsletter through the Armchair Reviewers. There are currently 90 Armchair Reviewers registered on the mailing list facilitated by the Tenant and Community Involvement Team; they all receive a proof of the newsletter along with a questionnaire on which to provide their feedback prior to the newsletter being finalised. Hard copies of the newsletter are sent to all tenants and leaseholders, copies are also circulated to staff and elected members, all editions are posted on the council's website and copies are also taken to events for members of the public to take away.
- 4.7 A great deal of work has been undertaken in updating the housing pages of the website; including a new task oriented structure and the development of more user friendly content. The development of these pages is ongoing including, for instance, the recent new design of the 'homes ready for rent' section. This section previously simply contained a black and white pdf containing basic property information on hard to let properties. The pages have now been updated to include 'feature properties' where prospective tenants can view photos and additional information about homes available and their localities. This development has been utilised in the promotion of the vacant Rowan Place properties.
- 4.8 A number of press releases and case studies have been issued over the past year. These have included a combination of areas covered from tenant 'good news stories' to WHQS community benefits case studies. The majority of these stories have been published in local press, as well as featuring on the council's website and postings on social media.

- 4.9 One particularly positive news story, for instance, focussed upon jobs and training opportunities made available through WHQS and how effective partnership working between Caerphilly Homes and Communities First is helping deliver this on the ground. The case study used was of a local young person who became a trainee with our in-house workforce after successfully completing a Communities First run 'Construction that works' course. The case study was sent to Welsh Government and resulted in Lesley Griffiths AM, the then Minister for Communities and Tackling Poverty, visiting Lansbury Park to view completed WHQS works and meeting the young person used in the case study. As the visit coincided with the announcement of the MRA funding for 2015 it received significant media coverage.
- 4.10 Effective communications between the Council and Welsh Government is vital. As well as co-ordinating the Ministerial visit to Lansbury Park, there was a Ministerial visit to Rowan Place and the official opening of Hafod Deg Resource Centre. In November 2015, we also co-ordinated a 'road trip' of the county borough for Welsh Government's Homes and Places Division. This visit incorporated visits to a number of sites including Rowan Place, Hafod Deg, Phillipstown and the affordable housing scheme at Thorncombe Road, Blackwood.
- 4.11 It is recognised that many tenants will not read newsletters or newspapers and will not actively seek out information on the website. A concerted effort has been made over the past year to increase opportunities for more informal communications with stakeholders and in exploring new methods of engaging with the wider tenant body. For example, we have increased use of social media and initiated a number of new campaigns designed to engage tenants and increase followers. The regular campaigns running on our Facebook and Twitter pages are: 'Monday money saver' which provides tenants with weekly budget saving tips; 'Find a home Friday' which is being used to actively promote our hard to let properties; 'A day in the life' which raises awareness of the range of services delivered by Caerphilly Homes through following depicting a typical work day of a range of staff across the housing service.
- 4.12 The use of film and digital storytelling as a communications method is also being used. There are a number of Caerphilly Homes commissioned films uploaded to the council's YouTube channel including The Regeneration of Rowan Place and Hafod Deg, a short animated film on preventing condensation and the Rough Sleepers Documentary. In summer 2015 the Penyrheol Community Association was supported with a digital storytelling project; the results of this were premiered at the last Caerphilly Homes Celebration Event.
- 4.13 Two annual Caerphilly Homes Celebration Events have now been held. Around 100 people attended last year's event; the attendance consists of a combination of tenants, staff, partner agencies and dignitaries. Extremely positive feedback has been received on both previous events; it has now grown so large that a new venue has been sourced for this year's event. As well as showcasing the previous year's achievements for Caerphilly Homes, the event also features the Transforming Lives and Communities Awards where tenants, local voluntary groups and staff are recognised for making a difference in the county borough. Last year's entries increased threefold on the previous year, clearly demonstrating its increasing success and popularity.
- 4.14 Face to face communication is one of the most effective methods of engagement. There has been a Caerphilly Homes presence at a variety of events from the larger ones like Blackwood Beach Party to smaller community based events like 'afternoon tea' for tenants in areas receiving WHQS works. There is close working with Communities First, linking into their events where possible to pool resources and add value. Alongside providing information and assistance to the public on the range of housing services, events are also used to promote specific initiatives, raise the Caerphilly Homes profile and develop a positive reputation.
- 4.15 Activities and new projects planned over the coming months, include the launch of a tenant gardening contest, a number of summer events including a pilot exercise utilising town centre spaces and 'A year in the life of' film to celebrate Caerphilly Homes achievements over the past year. The investment being made into the regeneration of both Rowan Place and Lansbury Park will also have considerable focus over the coming months, from consultation and engagement events to opportunities for 'good news stories' and positive publicity for

Caerphilly Homes and the council as a whole. The Communications Action Plan will be reviewed.

- 4.16 The use of GovDelivery is being explored as an opportunity for more targeted, proactive communications with stakeholders. For instance, to update prospective tenants on 'feature properties' from our homes ready to rent section, to raise awareness of tenant involvement opportunities and, potentially, to send out frequent Caerphilly Homes news bulletins to stakeholders.
- 4.17 It has also been recognised that, as a flagship programme for the council, further emphasis should be made on further raising the profile of the WHQS programme. Momentum will be built over coming months through utilising a variety of mechanisms including increased social media postings and positive news stories issued to local press etc.
- 4.18 Regular progress reports will be provided to both WHQS Project Board and CHTG to update on communications activities across Caerphilly Homes.

## **5. EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS**

- 5.1 This report is for information purposes only, so the Councils EqIA process does not need to be applied.

## **6. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 6.1 There are no financial implications arising from the report but the annual expenditure on communications is £49,646.

## **7. PERSONNEL IMPLICATIONS**

- 7.1 This report has no direct personnel implications.

## **8. CONSULTATIONS**

- 8.1 Comments received from consultees have been incorporated into the report.

## **9. RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 9.1 The report is for information.

## **10. REASON FOR THE RECOMMENDATION**

- 10.1 To provide members of the CHTG with an update on communications activity.

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Appendices:

Appendix A – Communications Action Plan