



CAERPHILLY HOMES TASK GROUP – 11TH DECEMBER 2014

SUBJECT: COMMUNICATIONS UPDATE

REPORT BY: INTERIM CHIEF EXECUTIVE

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 To provide members of the Caerphilly Homes Task Group with an update on communications activities undertaken over the previous year, along with plans for 2015.

2. SUMMARY

- 2.1 Effective communications is essential to ensuring all stakeholders have an awareness of the Caerphilly Homes brand and are kept up to date on progress across the housing service. Key to effective communications is the delivery of timely messages, using a range of methods appropriate for specific target audiences.
- 2.2 A great deal of work has taken place over the past year to raise the profile of Caerphilly Homes, both internally and externally, through a variety of methods and media. A number of new initiatives have been implemented, alongside the continuation and enhancement of existing communications activities.
- 2.3 A key priority for the coming year will be the establishment of a mixed stakeholder working group to oversee a full-scale review of communications across Caerphilly Homes; the findings of which will form the basis for a revised communications strategy.

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 Council is committed to ensuring that the WHQS investment transforms not only homes but also lives and communities.
- 3.3 The Single Integrated Plan 2013-2017 has a priority to "Improve standards of housing and communities, giving appropriate access to services across the County Borough".
- 3.4 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."

4. THE REPORT

- 4.1 Timely press releases, relaying 'good news stories', are a free and effective method of communicating with key stakeholders and the wider public. Positive media coverage helps to raise awareness of the 'Caerphilly Homes' brand and build a positive reputation of the housing service. The Communications and Tenant Engagement Officer has continued to work closely with the Corporate Communications team over the past year, feeding into the corporate media planner to ensure a steady flow of information is maintained.
- 4.2 The Caerphilly Homes tenant newsletter provides a mechanism for ensuring all council tenants and leaseholders are sent consistent messages and information on the housing service. The six monthly frequency of this newsletter has been maintained over the past year, with issues distributed in May and November. A panel of tenant Armchair Reviewers was set up by the Tenant and Community Involvement Team in late 2013; their role is to provide feedback on the newsletter and other communications materials. To date they have undertaken 3 reviews of the newsletter and their feedback is being used to aid continuous improvement of the publication.
- 4.3 Caerphilly Homes established its own Facebook page in May 2013 as a mechanism for more informal engagement with tenants, particularly those traditionally classed as 'hard to reach'. The page has continued to grow over the past year and Caerphilly Homes' social media presence was also enhanced with the establishment of a Twitter account.

Tenants also have their own social media pages, branded as Caerphilly Tenants, People and Communities. These pages are operated completely independently of the council, but the Communications and Tenant Engagement Officer works closely with the group and they regularly assist in promoting Caerphilly Homes' activities. Their support has proved extremely beneficial in delivering messages to the wider tenant body over the past year.

- 4.4 A key priority over the past year has been to increase opportunities for informal engagement with tenants; this has been achieved through community events held throughout the county borough in conjunction with Communities First. The Caerphilly Homes profile was also further raised at larger events over the summer, including Blackwood Beach Party and The Big Cheese. The single source supplier relationship was also further strengthened and promoted, with Robert Price Builders' Merchants directly involved in several of these events.
- 4.5 A Caerphilly Homes Celebration Evening was held in September which saw tenants, staff, elected members and partner agencies come together to celebrate some of the achievements made in delivering the promises made to tenants prior to the stock transfer ballot. Over 90 people attended and the feedback received from the event was very positive.

The first Transforming Lives and Communities Awards were also held as part of the Celebration Evening. The awards were developed in response to the commitment made in the Offer Document to tenants, prior to the stock transfer ballot, to establish a 'good neighbour' recognition scheme. The awards recognised local people who make a significant difference to the lives of our tenants and the communities in which they live. Additional funding was received for the awards through sponsorship from Robert Price Builders' Merchants and their suppliers.

Tenants were heavily involved in planning the Celebration Evening and were keen to play a major role in the event itself. The Communications and Tenant Engagement Officer supported them in their plans and, in particular, with the production of a film to be premiered at the event. The vision was to produce a film which would inspire local communities to come together and make a difference; tenants chose Trinant as the community in which to base the project. Along with being used as part of the Celebration Evening, the aim was also to produce a film which would promote active citizenship in the county borough and encourage future similar projects in other communities.

The project itself evolved into a much bigger community engagement opportunity in Trinant. The filming project took place over 3 sessions; the first was an open session where community were invited to attend to find out more about project, this was followed the following week with 2 consecutive days of rehearsals and filming. Over 50 adults and children from the community attended these sessions and participated in the filming, alongside tenants from throughout the county borough. This project really helped us build relationships with the local community and develop a positive reputation amongst our tenants.

- 4.6 There was a clear need to review and improve the housing pages of the website, as the structure and content had become quite outdated and difficult to navigate. Over the past year a working group of staff, from across Caerphilly Homes, has been undertaking a review of the housing pages of the website. Tenants were also engaged in the process, with a survey and user testing undertaken by the Armchair Reviewers.

A new structure has now been developed for the housing pages and user friendly, plain English content produced for all sections. The review has been undertaken in conjunction with the corporate redesign of the website. The new structure is task oriented, so thinks much more about the user journey in order to make it easier and quicker for people to find the information they need. Content management of the website will, in future, be devolved to individual departments making it much easier to ensure information contained on the housing pages is relevant and up to date. Regular testing through the Armchair Reviewers will also continue to be carried out in order to ensure the website remains user friendly and easy to navigate.

- 4.7 Work is ongoing to create a brand identity for Caerphilly Homes; a key element of this is ensuring that all communications materials are produced with the same 'look and feel'. A style has now been developed, through work with the corporate design team, and is being used for all new housing publications to ensure consistency in use of the Caerphilly Homes brand. Existing housing materials and literature are currently being rebranded incrementally, as and when reprints are required, to prevent wastage and help keep costs down.

A working group will be established in 2015 to lead a communications review. Part of this exercise will include a review and rebrand of all materials to ensure that they are still fit for purpose, written in line with plain English and fit the Caerphilly Homes style; Armchair Reviewers will also play a key role in this process.

4.8 **Key Priorities for 2015**

An initial priority for 2015 will be to work with the Tenant and Community Involvement Team to recruit a communications working group, consisting of tenants and staff. This group will be responsible for undertaking a full-scale communications review, resulting in a revised communications strategy. The group will also have an ongoing role in the delivery of the strategy and associated action plan. Considerable work is also needed to improve internal communications; staff representatives on the communications group will be used to drive forward this process by helping to develop an internal communications strategy.

Events have been particularly effective in helping us engage with and hold two way dialogue with tenants, particularly those who have traditionally been seen as 'hard to reach', e.g. younger tenants. A structured events programme will be developed for 2015 directly linked to the WHQS programme, allowing us to take a more proactive approach to tenant communications and engagement. Events held prior to surveys will help to raise awareness of WHQS, provide tenants with the opportunity to ask staff questions about the programme face to face and help us build relationships with tenants before work begins. Other housing teams, e.g. Tenant and Community Involvement and area housing staff, will also be involved in these events to ensure maximum outcomes for tenants.

Following the success of the tenant film, there are further plans to explore greater use of this medium. For instance, a brief animated information film is currently being produced for tenants on the prevention of condensation. A potential community filming project is also being

considered to link with works taking place in Rowan Place.

The Rowan Place project in itself presents excellent opportunities to raise the Caerphilly Homes profile and demonstrate tangible outcomes delivered through WHQS. There will be considerable focus on Rowan Place next year, with a specific communications and engagement plan being developed for the project.

More work is needed to raise the profile of Caerphilly Homes within the housing sector in Wales and the Communications and Tenant Engagement Officer has been actively working with tenants over the past year to raise the profile amongst peers. This has been done in a variety of ways, from CIH Rising Stars Cymru contest and the Welsh Housing Awards, to taking part in national social media campaigns like Council Homes Chat and Housing Day. This momentum will continue to be built upon in 2015 to ensure Caerphilly Homes receives sufficient recognition from its peer organisations.

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 Key items of expenditure over the previous year:-

• Tenant Newsletter (x 2 Editions)	£16,257.00
• Celebration Evening / TLC Awards	£ 2,400.00
• Events – Venues, Equipment, Merchandise, Etc	£ 4,100.00

7. PERSONNEL IMPLICATIONS

7.1 This report has no direct personnel implications.

8. CONSULTATIONS

8.1 The views of consultees listed are incorporated within the report.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

9.1 That the contents of this report be noted.

10. REASON FOR THE RECOMMENDATION

10.1 To provide a progress update on communications.

11. STATUTORY POWER

11.1 Housing Acts and Local Government Acts. This is a Cabinet function.

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Consultees:

- Cllr. Gerald Jones, Deputy Leader & Cabinet Member for Housing
- Cllr Barbara Jones, Deputy Leader & Cabinet Member for Corporate Services
- Cllr Ken James, Cabinet Member for Regeneration, Planning & Sustainable Development
- Phil Davy, Head of Programmes
- Shaun Couzens, Chief Housing Officer
- Nicole Scammell, Acting Director of Corporate Services and S151 Officer
- Jane Roberts-Waite, Strategic Coordination Manager
- Stephen Pugh, Corporate Communications Manager
- Mandy Betts, Tenant and Community Involvement Manager