

# Nottingham City Homes communications and marketing strategy – 2008 to 2011

## Introduction

This communications and marketing strategy sets out how Nottingham City Homes (NCH) will communicate with and involve our customers, employees and stakeholders in decisions about services and policies that affect their lives.

This three year strategy will make sure all communications and marketing activities support and embed our mission, vision, values and strategic objectives. It will be reviewed once a year to reflect developing corporate objectives and the principles set out in annual delivery plans.

The strategy also seeks to embed the principles of tenant participation across all services. We have involved our tenants, leaseholders and partners in the creation of this strategy. It links directly to other supporting strategies and agreements, including:

- Tenant and Leaseholder Participation Compact
- NCH accommodation, ICT, culture change and HR strategies
- Joint NCH/ Nottingham City Council communications strategy to co-promote an improved awareness of both organisations' roles and how we work together.

## Background

To deliver the highest quality communications and marketing we need to understand our customers' needs and their views on our current arrangements.

NCH has a diverse customer base:

- 58% are single people or couples without dependent children
- About 20% are from black or other minority ethnic groups
- 40% are relatively young (aged between 16 and 44), while 28% are over 65, 15% are over 75.
- 54% have a long-standing illness, disability or infirmity
- High dependency on state benefits – two thirds of tenants receive housing benefit
- Low economic activity – only a quarter of tenants are in employment
- Improving educational attainment but historically lower than the national average.

Our tenants and leaseholders believe we are improving the quality of our communications. Key facts from the 2007 STATUS survey\*:

- 77% say we are good at keeping them informed – up from 60% in 2005
- 96% read NCH News (monthly customer newsletter)
- 57% are satisfied with opportunities to participate in decision making – up from 40% in 2005

- 81% believe we take account of their views when making decisions
- Only half of our customers are aware of tenant participation compacts – but this is significantly higher than the 15% who were aware in 2005
- 71% own a mobile phone, with 31% interested in receiving information via text message
- A sizeable minority – 18% – would like to access their account online.

\*survey sent to 50% of customers, with a 33% return rate

## **Why do we communicate?**

Any housing organisation which wants to be seen as excellent and high performing needs a communication strategy.

Communication is a vital component in determining how our customers judge the overall reputation of Nottingham City Homes. Robust and consistent communication, branding and marketing improves customer awareness and take-up of our services. It is one of the simplest and most effective ways to improve customer satisfaction.

If NCH services are to be continuously developed to be customer focussed we must:

- listen and respond to tenants and leaseholders' views and concerns – and involve more in the development and running of our services
- keep audiences informed and engaged via effective communication and marketing
- improve the accessibility of services to socially excluded and vulnerable customers
- work with key stakeholders to build trust and confidence in the company.

## **Who we communicate with**

Our customers, stakeholders and partners include:

- Tenants and leaseholders
- Prospective customers
- Tenant and leaseholder representatives – area panels, forums, tenant and residents associations, recognised local contacts
- Community, voluntary and special interest groups/issues forums
- NCH Board members
- Councillors
- NCH employees
- Unions
- Suppliers and contractors
- Media – local, regional, national, trade
- Nottingham City Council and other local public sector partners – eg NHS, police, fire service

## **Communications principles**

Our principles of communication follow our values. These are:

### Tell the truth

We will ensure the company maintains a high reputation with its customers and key stakeholders.

### Keep our promises

We will be clear and realistic about what we can deliver, when and how, and make sure we promote our service standards and performance.

### Be fair

We will provide comprehensive information to customers, partners and stakeholders using a range of the most appropriate communication channels and formats.

### Respect the individual

We will encourage an appreciation that NCH is a people-based and customer-focused organisation.

### Work as one team

We will develop and maintain a powerful brand and use understandable, accessible and unambiguous language in all our communications with customers

### Encourage fresh thinking/ strive for the best

We will initiate planned campaigns that are innovative, targeted and timely. Individually and collectively these will build positive relationships with customers, the media and stakeholders.

### **Value for money**

We will ensure that all communications and tenant participation activities are planned cost effectively. We will:

- Review the number of information publications, and where appropriate remove or merge them to reduce 'information overload'
- Co-ordinate the flow of information to customers from different parts of NCH, to make sure key messages are being targeted effectively
- Develop new and innovate ways to communicate, using new technology to reduce costs (linked to the ICT strategy)
- Regularly review and renegotiate agreements with suppliers to drive down costs, improve quality, or ideally both
- Consider entering into longer term agreements where there is both a financial advantage to the company AND the opportunity to add value to communications and marketing activities by working with fewer suppliers.

## **Equality and diversity**

The varying nature of our customer base must be recognised when planning the content, style and delivery of our communications.

We will make sure the diversity of our communities is taken into account in the way we choose to engage people, and be sensitive to different cultural needs. We do not accept that certain groups are 'hard to reach'. We will:

- Know our customers
  - Establish profile information on at least 85% of customers by March 2009
  - Work with Nottingham City Council's language solutions team to identify which community languages are spoken and where across Nottingham.
- Target our communications
  - Use profile information and demographic profiling to ensure we are communicating with our customers in a format they can understand
  - Improve our distribution channels to enable cost effective targeting of communities and individuals
  - Offer translation, interpretation and other services on demand to ensure equality of customer access
- Innovate and involve
  - Work with our partners, community groups and customers to establish local solutions to communications needs – for example through monthly surgeries in community languages, and recruiting customers and employees to support translation and interpretation services.

## **Risk management**

The communications and marketing strategy will play a key role in supporting the risk management framework. A robust and company wide approach to communications is a vital mitigation around risks identified in the corporate risk register, specifically around reputation management and failure to meet acceptable levels of customer satisfaction. In addition, it is proposed to have a specific risk register for communications and marketing, as set out in the risk management framework.

## **Communication and marketing activities**

Our work is broadly categorised under one of the following headings:

- Reputation management
- Tenant participation and consultation
- Internal communications

## Reputation management

### Public relations

As the biggest supplier of social housing in the city, our reputation affects Nottingham's reputation. We are ambitious for the city and we have a major role to play, particularly around improving estates and tackling anti-social behaviour.

We will enhance our reputation by:

- Proactive identification of news opportunities and regular production of timely news releases, for use by press, radio and TV
- Processing media requests effectively and efficiently to meet reporters' deadlines wherever possible
- Providing appropriate media training to employees and Board members
- Responding appropriately to media criticism of the company
- Establishing and maintaining protocols for media handling covering press briefings/ conferences, news releases and media statements
- Working in partnership with other organisations with which we have common interests – particularly Nottingham City Council and the police.

### Corporate image

The NCH brand was refreshed in April 2008 to reflect the positive development of the company over the previous year, and the establishment of the new mission, vision and values. We will maintain a consistent corporate identity by using the brand to support the promotion of key messages.

We will shape our communications around a small number of key themes. These have been developed following consultation with customers, so they reflect the issues of greatest importance to them:

- Anti-social behaviour
- Allocations
- Repairs
- Customer care
- Tenant involvement
- Rent
- Voids
- 'Modern Warm Secure' (Decent Homes)

We will market our services, through:

- Developing a clear framework for the use of our corporate identity and related themes
- Consistently applying branding and themed sub-branding to marketing materials and communications media to enhance the delivery of information
- The adoption of a 'house style' for plain English, to be used across all NCH literature, publications and customer communications
- Continuing to develop NCH News as our flagship communication channel to all customers, plus targeted newsletters for leaseholders, sheltered housing, councillors and employees

- The development of a consistent corporate policy for displaying information in housing offices and the proposed property shop
- The production of a promotional DVD to showcase key services

### Publications

All NCH publications will be produced according to our brand guidelines. This will ensure the quality and consistency of content, format and tone of voice.

We will audit all publications regularly to assess their effectiveness, clarity, quality and value for money. As a principle we will aim to produce the fewest number of publications. This will reduce any sense of 'information overload' and minimise the risk of duplication and associated inconsistency of messages.

All publications will include an appropriate 'call to action' – for example directing readers to the website or to contact an individual or team within NCH or partner organisation.

All publications will have regard to the highest standards of equality and diversity. Key documents will be automatically available in alternative languages and formats, with other documents available on demand.

Our partners will be offered space with our newsletters to promote services of relevance to our customers. This will be provided on a semi-commercial basis to cover the additional cost of print and distribution.

### E-communications

The 2007 STATUS survey revealed that a third of our customers have access to the internet, with almost three quarters owning a mobile phone. These percentages are expected to continue to grow. There is huge potential to use these channels to deliver information and services.

We will develop innovative and cost effective IT solutions to transform the creation and delivery of information – both to our customers and within NCH.

The NCH website will be continually developed to become a 'one-stop-shop' for information about the company and its services. The site will be based around our key themes.

This will:

- Allow the creation of centralised systems covering events, tenant participation, publications, allocations and exchanges, customer access to account information and payments
- Ensure consistency and clarity of presentation of key messages.

The website will offer text in alternative languages and formats, provide links to partner organisations and clearly show service standards and current performance related to each key service.

We will expand our use of text messaging to communicate key messages to non office based employees, and support key services including rents and repairs.

## **Customer participation, consultation and feedback**

We believe that services for tenants and leaseholders are improved when customers themselves are continuously involved in their development. This view is supported by national public bodies including the Audit Commission, which consistently highlights the benefits of greater customer involvement in its inspection reports.

The communications and marketing team will support the Tenant and Leaseholder Involvement team to deliver a comprehensive programme of consultation and involvement.

Activities will be based on the core standards for information, consultation and involvement set out in the Tenant and Leaseholder Participation Compact 2007-2010.

The communications and marketing team will:

- Develop a tenant and leaseholder participation toolkit
- Promote the benefits of customer participation to NCH employees and develop initiatives to encourage them to sign up customers
- Ensure there is reference to tenant and leaseholder participation on all communications sent from NCH
- Provide and maintain a comprehensive section on the NCH website dedicated to customer involvement.

## **Area panels and forums**

We will support all panels and forums to develop their own publicity and communications activities. This is based on the principle that they should carry out as much activity themselves as possible, but within boundaries agreed with the head of communications in advance. This includes use of branding, presentation of information and management of events. The panels and forums are required to follow this strategy.

The communications and marketing team will:

- Establish the communications and publicity requirements of all area panels and forums
- Agree working relationships with them (recognising that our involvement will change over time)
- Provide a range of solutions and a professional and timely service to meet those requirements
- Provide each recognised group with space on the NCH website to promote their activities, meetings and events.

## **Customer feedback**

The Compliments, Comments and Complaints (3Cs) system was introduced in April 2007. Its principle function is to make sure customer feedback is actively encouraged, and the information used to improve services.

The communications and marketing team will support the customer relations team to promote the 3Cs system by:

- Placing customer comments forms and reply boxes in prominent locations in all NCH offices
- Ensuring all publications invite comment and opinion from their intended audiences
- Maintaining a customer feedback page on the NCH website that allows all users to submit compliments, comments and complaints
- Publicise compliments to support our reputation management activities and improve employee morale
- Regularly inform employees, customers and stakeholders about our responses and actions in light of comments and complaints.

## **Internal communications**

All employees interact with customers (internal and external), partners and other external audiences, which collectively impacts upon their perception of NCH. There is a shared responsibility to ensure all our communication and interaction is timely, effective, positive and consistent with key messages.

Effective internal communication means employees can deliver more customer focused services. It is a key to:

- Improved employee morale and motivation
- Greater productivity
- Lower absenteeism and turnover
- Increased participation in decision making processes
- Stronger understanding and commitment to company goals
- More job satisfaction through understanding how individual roles contribute to our overall success.

## **Roles and responsibilities**

It is recognised that excellent internal communications is a core management responsibility, and therefore the Executive Management Team (EMT), assistant directors and heads of service have a key role to play. All managers must provide information to their teams that:

- Enables employees to perform well (both in terms of effective management, development and provision of appropriate information relevant to their work)
- Ensures protocols and guidelines are adhered to (eg HR related, customer care and governance arrangements)
- Is timely and appropriately targeted (eg to heads of service, Board members or all employees)

- Supports and embed the company's mission, vision and values (eg employee suggestion scheme)
- Enables employees to become active ambassadors for the company.

The communications and marketing team will ensure channels are in place to facilitate effective two way communication across the company. The primary routes for internal communication will be the intranet and Team Briefing, published each Wednesday. Information included will be cascaded through team meetings, which managers are required to hold on a regular basis.

### **Internal communications scheme**

A scheme will be developed which takes these principles forward and sets out a clear framework for the consistent application of communications tools and methods.

This will build upon the 'let's make the difference' programme, completed in May 2008, and the Investor in People accreditation of November 2007. The scheme will set out standards and rules for internal communications.

### **Measurements of success**

We shall monitor the effectiveness and quality of our communication activities through:

- Overall satisfaction with communications – measured through annual STATUS survey
- Readership levels of key publications
- Press releases issued and percentage used in relevant media
- Press cuttings and media monitoring – level and nature of coverage, reported monthly to Board and EMT
- Brand recognition – measured through annual STATUS survey
- Customer responses to direct mail, leaflets, promotions and other marketing activity
- Unique visits to the website (number of individual visitors)
- Response rates, quality of feedback and an understanding shown by consultees as to the purpose of consultation
- Regular monitoring of compliments, comments, complaints and individual feedback – to assess customer understanding and expectations of the process
- Employee attitude surveys measuring impact of internal communications.

Specific targets for each of the above will be set out in annual action plans.

### **Delivering the strategy**

The strategy will be underpinned by annual action plans and a series of protocols and statements. These cover:

- Key themes and related key messages
- Brand guidelines

- Media relations protocol
- Marketing campaign protocol – covering development of plan, production of materials, timescales etc
- E-communications protocol – managing content for the website and intranet
- Communications and marketing annual action plan.

Responsibility for implementing this strategy and accompanying protocols rests with the head of communications, who will agree annual action plans with directors, assistant directors and head of service.

### **Communications and marketing team**

The team brings together public relations, marketing, website and design functions to ensure a coordinated and effective communications service for all parts of NCH.

The team will oversee the delivery of all communications activities, including those projects developed and managed in other parts of the company, to make sure all parts of NCH are communicating as one team. Where necessary the head of communications will negotiate changes in scheduling to prevent conflict between campaigns coming from different parts of the company.

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