

TENANT AND LEASEHOLDER PANEL
3 February 2016

Lead Officer: Executive Director of Place

Wards: All

Agenda Item: 10

Subject: - Open House Newsletter

1. Recommendation

- 1.1 The Panel is asked to comment on a proposal for the future publication of the Open House newsletter for tenants and leaseholders.

2. Summary

- 2.1 This report proposes that the Open House newsletter becomes an on-line (electronic) publication with an option for tenants and leaseholders to 'opt in' to receive a printed copy posted to them. This change could create a saving to the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) of approximately £50,000 per annum.

3. Background

- 3.1 Open House was first published in 1988 with the aim of providing an effective means by which the council can communicate with its 16,000 tenants and leaseholders.
- 3.2 Currently the newsletter is produced 3 times a year and is posted to all tenants and leaseholders. It provides readers with the latest news of interest to council tenants and leaseholders, keeping them up to date about the work of the council, feedback on consultation, information on tenants' rights and responsibilities, information on how to get involved and community activities.
- 3.3 An editorial group oversees the content and maintains an objective viewpoint. Residents are invited to be members of this group to ensure the content includes residents' points of view.
- 3.4 The newsletter is well designed and feedback from residents has generally been positive. The most recent survey was conducted of members of the Housing Involvement Database (HID) in December 2015. The 227 responses received told us that nearly half read it thoroughly and most of the rest glance through it. 88% found the publication useful. When asked how they prefer to receive information from the council 46% said email, 20% said web site, 42% said paper newsletter and 44% letter.

3.5 Articles are written by council officers and the newsletter is designed by the council's in house design team. Printing is outsourced and it is delivered by Royal Mail. The cost of producing each newsletter varies but is roughly as follows:

Design £1,000
Print £3,200
Delivery £12,700
Total £16,900

3.6 However, for the reasons set out in another report contained on this agenda, the council is looking at a range of options to make savings to the HRA. One option is to discontinue the production of the newsletter or reduce costs by approximately £47,700 per annum by moving it on-line.

3.7 Recent editions of Open House have also included an insert of 2 views magazine. This is an intergenerational newsletter produced by the Sustainable Communities Team. This publication will also move on-line and create an additional saving of approximately £3,600 per annum.

4. The case for retaining Open House

4.1 It is proposed to retain the publication of a tenant newsletter for the following reasons:

- Open House is a direct form of communication which provides a range of information including changes to benefits, education and employment opportunities.
- It helps to promote key initiatives and reinforce key messages e.g recycling & waste disposal.
- Celebrates the council's and residents' achievements
- Is a mechanism for consulting residents on proposed housing policy or strategy changes.
- Advertises and promotes upcoming events, meetings and community activities
- Enables the council to meet the regulatory requirement of ensuring that 'information and communication is appropriate to the diverse needs of their tenants'. This in turn should increase tenant satisfaction.
- The latest survey shows that 88% of tenants find the newsletter useful.

5. Future proposal

- 5.1. It is clear from paragraph 4 above that the need to retain Open House is important and is an effective means of communicating important information to tenants and leaseholders.
- 5.2 However, by providing an option for tenants & leaseholders to be emailed an electronic version and making it available to download from the council's website would save both printing and postage costs.
- 5.3 It is proposed that the Spring 2016 edition of Open House will be the final one that is posted to all tenants and leaseholders. In this edition readers will be invited to register to receive future electronic editions via email. Where we already have email addresses residents will automatically be sent electronic versions.
- 5.4 To date over 4,200 tenants have registered on 'My Account' and we have 25% of tenants' email addresses on our property database.
- 5.5 Readers who would prefer a printed copy to be posted to them will be invited 'opt in' to receive a copy by post. Additionally those who are automatically sent an electronic copy will have the option to 'opt out' of receiving an email.
- 5.6 Open House will also be available to download from the Council's website, the resident involvement Facebook page and on the Council's Twitter feed.
- 5.7 Tenants and leaseholders will continue to be invited to attend the Open House editorial group.

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