



DATE: April 2024

REPORT OF: EHA Communication Scrutiny Taskforce

INVESTIGATION TITLE: Scrutiny review of communication at EHA

Investigation Summary

Our Communication Taskforce has reviewed the Association's approach to communication.

The following areas were reviewed by the Taskforce:

- Review of tenants' own perception of 'good' customer service and communication
- Review of tenants' experience of communication at EHA
- EHA internal phone system – demonstration
- EHA Customer Relations Manager (CRM) facility – demonstration

Document review:

- EHA Communications Standard

Recommended procedure

It is recommended that relevant staff members and the Management Team consider the contents of this report.

Staff members are requested to respond to the report, ready for presentation to Board on the next opportunity the agenda allows.

Board members are requested to consider the contents of this report and provide responses to the recommendations and actions.

Background

Communication is an ongoing issue for many organisations. According to the Housing Ombudsman, in their latest Spotlight report: Relationship of Equals (2024):

*“Effective communication is critical in maintaining positive relationships between landlords and residents. Unfortunately, poor communication is often the **root cause of housing complaints**, eroding trust and leading to escalating issues. In fact, in 68% of cases reviewed over 15 months, poor communication was a key issue.”*

With reference to EHA’s Formal Complaints management, communication has been identified as a key issue within 72% of cases taken from November 2023 to end of March 2024.

Our Tenant Satisfaction Measures results from Q4 2023/24 reflect this, where our tenants’ perception of our approach to – and our quality of – communication has been highlighted as a key issue.

“[...] of the more negative comments, tenants most frequently referred to the repairs service, including the concerns with the timescales, communication before the work starts and the outstanding and forgotten repairs. For instance, one tenant stated, “Do all the repairs not just the emergency ones” and another said, “Listen and come out when they are meant to.”

Tenants also commented upon tenant services and management, in particular the value for money with rent and service charges, communications and information, including communications in general. While others would like home improvements, such as new doors or windows.”

Upon review of the latest Tenant Satisfaction Measures report in April, our Scrutiny Audit Panel selected communication as the first Scrutiny review of 2024. They noted that improvements to communication across all departments should have a positive impact across all of EHA’s services, therefore increasing overall satisfaction with EHA.

The Taskforce investigation proposal was drafted by EHA staff, and reviewed by SAP to ensure satisfaction with planned approach and methodology. All suggestions were adopted and the proposal updated accordingly.

Link to Corporate Plan

Under the 2024 – 2027 Corporate Strategy approved by Board in March 2024, this

review falls within the ‘Tenant Voice and Influence’ and ‘High Performing and Resilient Organisation’ strategic priorities.

Regulatory references

- Housing Ombudsman Service: Spotlight on: Attitudes, respect and rights – Relationship of Equals 2024
- Regulator of Social Housing: Transparency, Influence and Accountability Standard

Scope of review

The Scrutiny Taskforce considered the following matters in the course of the review;

- Strengths
- Weaknesses
- Performance against regulatory and sector expectation/ recommendation

Summary of activities

Stage 1:

Initial satisfaction survey of experience of communication at EHA, and general expectations of good customer service and communication from service providers.

Stage 2:

1. Review of all survey results, to identify key themes and issues
2. Workshop/ appointments to work towards potential solutions to identified issues
3. Overview and demonstration of EHA’s internal call system and display
4. Overview and demonstration of EHA’s Customer Relationship Management System (CRM)
5. Brief summary of weekly call statistics to evidence call volumes
6. Feed into draft Customer Service standard

Engagement summary:

	Possible respondents	Actual respondents and response

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		rate
Stage 1:		
Initial satisfaction survey	1,510 + 135 (MHA)	61 (3.7%)
<i>Liaison with Assisted living scheme officers to ensure tenants who required support could contribute</i>		
Stage 2:		
Review of all survey results, to identify key themes and issues	6	6
Workshop/ appointments to work towards potential solutions to identified issues	6	6
Overview and demonstration of EHA's internal call system and display	6	4
Overview and demonstration of EHA's Customer Relationship Management System (CRM)	6	4
Brief summary of weekly call statistics to evidence call volumes	6	4
Review of draft Customer Service standard based upon tenant and staff feedback	6	6

Initially we received responses from 61 of our tenants (representing 3% of our 1982 of our households). Of these responses, 20 indicated they were interested in joining the Taskforce; 12 of these were selected as a good cross section to represent our tenants. Ultimately, 6 tenants took part in our Taskforce, sharing their views in a number of different ways – an overall tenant representation of 0.15%.

The Taskforce discussed representation in depth; although the Taskforce includes a range of ages and locations:

“This is a self-select representative of tenants. Only those who have experienced issues and have been willing/ able to share their time have fed back around communication. This may overstate some issues they have experienced as issues across the organisation”

Although a number of suggestions have been raised, the Taskforce is clear that staff at EHA try their best and remain a highly customer focussed organisation. A number of participants had direct experience of working with other organisations (Riverside, Home Group and councils across the country) – the general consensus is that EHA provides the best service and tenants are treated like individuals, not just ‘numbers’

Our Taskforce was also keen to highlight that the work they have done is aimed both at improving services to tenants, but also aimed to reduce pressure on staff through

the establishment of clear expectations: *“Let tenants help you work out how to meet their needs to work towards better service all-round.”*

Working with colleagues

Throughout March, the Customer Service Manager asked members of the management team to work with colleagues around their views around communication.

Particular consideration was given to achievable timescales for and definitions of an ‘urgent’ or ‘general’ enquiry.

When the draft report was shared with the Taskforce, this was also shared with staff for feedback to establish whether the recommendations are achievable, and whether they are likely to address identified issues.

Communication – Tenants’ Workshop 28th March 2024 *(4 attendees in person, 1 online and 1 home visit interview)*

Session overview:

- Introduction – *background of EHA, regulation and staff structure*
- TSM results – *overview of annual results summary*
- Review of survey data – *identifying key themes*
- Problems and solutions – *discussion around key issues raised in survey, and opportunity to suggest solutions*

Communication – Follow up Workshop 17th April 2024 *(2 attendees in person, 2 online, 2 feedback via written communication)*

Session overview:

- Consultation key themes – *review of listed issues and solutions to date to ensure all areas are covered*
- Review and approval of draft report so far – *suggestions to be included in later draft before presentation to staff and to SAP*
- Consumer standards – *brief overview of standards EHA needs to meet to satisfy the Regulator of Social Housing*
- Draft renewed service standard – *brief review of collated tenant and staff feedback*

Summary of findings

Strengths:

- Our tenants value the ‘human side’ of EHA, the personal touch and the positive relationships developed between staff and tenants. Our staff know our tenants and vice versa. EHA are not some faceless organisation driven by a

computer. This is reflected in TSM results

- Our Taskforce believe that EHA has a strong customer focus and are proactive in their desire to improve services for their customers
- Our staff take time to speak to our customers and have a sound understanding of properties and the local area, which is positive for customers
- Just over half of respondents (54%) rate EHA's communication with them as clear and effective.
- 50% of respondents think we keep them up to date with all they need to know about their home
- General feedback on EHA staff conduct is positive

Weaknesses:

- Tenants have requested something which clearly states expectations for customers – *'communicate expected response during first contact'*
- The majority of respondents (64%) state that communication within EHA could be improved (including 'neither')
- 80% of respondents rate EHA's communication with contractors and partner agencies as 'could be better'
- Only 36% of respondents think internal communication across teams is 'clear and effective'
- 50% of respondents think we keep them up to date with all they need to know about their home
- The Association receives high volumes of calls, a number of which are *assumed* to be follow up calls, chasing repairs and outstanding queries
- Reports of missed appointments, contractors just 'showing up' without appointments and repeat appointments due to insufficient information or parts

Other key considerations:

- The majority of tenants (37%) prefer to contact staff directly if they have a query, followed by accessing our website (25%)
- 35% of tenants preferred communication method is via email, followed by 30% who prefer to be contacted directly by staff over the phone or in person
- The two most common barriers to contacting EHA is work patterns meaning tenants cant contact during office hours and a disability (both physical and mental health issues) making it difficult (32% each, of 61 respondents), these tenants appreciate we offer alternative routes for communication, however particularly with online/ digital communication, they believe improvement to this service is required to improve reliability.
- Taskforce members were keen to make sure that EHA staff and managers

were not disheartened by the recommendations or comments from the Taskforce. They wanted to assure staff that there is a lot that is already very positive in communication and how services are delivered, but there are also areas that can be improved; which may make a big positive impact for tenants and staff.

Direct Customer feedback

“asking contractors to communicate more effectively with tenants, so they don't give such short notice on appointments due to personal commitments like work and family.”

“We wish we'd known about EHA 30 years ago, when we moved to the area”

“Parity between communication methods; I feel that phone calls and letters are prioritised over other forms currently, which is a disability access issue.”

“Better communication between repairs, contractors and tenants”

“Contractor's comms integrated with EHA's”

“EHA treats its tenants as people, not just as a number. I've never felt stigmatised by EHA staff”

“I don't currently experience the same level of service from the digital route as I do over the telephone. To increase tenants' use of MyAccount you'll need to invest in it to improve it, not just promote it”

“stop sending letters!”

Recommendations

General

1. Implementation of a new '**Communication Standard**' for tenants and staff to use as a framework for all communication, timescales to manage customer expectation, and to ensure staff provide updates where the standard cannot be met

2. **Data collection and recording** - gather, record and use communication preferences

'General needs does not mean no needs': recognise, respond and appropriately

record vulnerabilities to provide (or signpost to) additional support.

3. Customer service training – for all staff around new service standard, and establish a consistent approach across departments:

- *Name and department when answering calls*
- *Voicemail – who to contact team/ officer in absence where urgent (not just switchboard if possible)*
- *Deliver bad news honestly and in a timely manner – just be honest when something can't be done*
- *Work with customer to establish solution – 'how would you like us to update you, what's the best time to call etc?'*
- *Where required, following up telephone conversation with a written communication*
- *CRM training to be provided*
- *Specific training/ guidance around mental health, dementia, autism, neurodiversity, ADHD, Autism etc.*
- *More consistent use of preferred communication methods – i.e. use of text messages*

4. Promotion and publicity – raise EHA's profile locally, 'tell our story', good news and achievements

work to reduce potential social housing stigma, misconception that social housing is for 'people on benefits', at risk of homelessness

5. MyAccount improvement in functionality and reliability for tenants
to increase consistent use and to free up telephones for those who can't access portal:

- *messages to be checked regularly*
- *MyAccount to replace unnecessary letters/ mandatory communication*

6. EHA website improvement in functionality and accessibility
to increase consistent use and reduce need to contact EHA with non-urgent queries to free up telephones for those who can't access portal:

- *to allow tenants to manage tenancy out of hours, access to account as well as all tenancy information*
- *Ensure site is accessible - browse aloud etc on new website once developed*

7. 'Faces to names' – more information on website about staff roles and responsibilities

team photograph and general contact – currently just executive team profiles

8. Automatic emails – from messages to EHA's 'enquiry' email,
outlining EHA's new communication standard as well as sign-posting if the query is

urgent

Internal communication

9. Improve cross-team communication – around tenant issues following the introduction of ‘hybrid working’.

- *More consistent use of CRM – to ensure all ongoing enquiries are logged*
- *3CX status updates to provide clarity for Customer Advisors to support tenants with query*
- *Access to visiting officer diaries, to allow for cross team approach for welfare and ad-hoc visits*
- *Team phone groups – where direct contact with an officer fails, call automatically diverts to wider team*
- *Out of office – replies include other team member/ a named contact*

External communication

10. Customer Service Training for Repairs Operatives: to ensure approach to EHA’s Customer Service is replicated by our contractors, within contract.
(Contractors represent EHA, and do not always provide same level of customer care – just because EHA pays for the work, shouldn’t mean tenants who receive the service should accept poor level of service)

11. Repairs confirmation – Text/ email appointment confirmation with job number upon each report of a repair.
(to reassure tenants job is in hand, with a clear timescale for resolution and reference to check progress on MyAccount if possible)

12. Who may visit your home: Regular updates around which contractors EHA works with, not just when awarded initial contract – who you can expect to attend your home on behalf of EHA

Focus on Repairs: we recognise from feedback that we need to focus specifically around communication within our repairs service. As part of our Tenant Engagement Strategy, we are working to form a ‘Repairs Advisory Panel’ to provide direct feedback and recommendation to our Repairs Manager, supported by the Engagement and Insight Officer.

Part of the Repairs Advisory Panel’s function will be to review performance information and tenant feedback, to work with EHA towards improvement. *Project will*

be scoped and established 2024/2025 once new Repairs Manager is in post.

Additional considerations

The following suggestions were raised during our workshops and interviews, which support some of the actions we are already taking as an organisation to improve communication:

‘Employ a problem solver’ to deal with complaints, and work to create ongoing improvements and solutions – EHA have already created and employed a ‘Complaints Officer’ and a ‘Business Intelligence Officer’. Our Complaints Officer manages all stage one and two complaints, working with tenants and staff towards resolution and ensuring all learning is implemented. Our Business Intelligence Officer will work across all teams to refine processes and improve efficiencies.

‘Multi skilled Customer Advisors’ to deal with all repairs enquiries. We advised that we previously implemented this approach between 2016-2018. During this period satisfaction with our repair’s performance reduced, we experienced an increase in ‘failure’ call volumes and contract management suffered. There was also a negative impact on application processing times and on arrears management as the repairs service is usually demand led and other parts of the job are often more pro-active. As a result, we now have dedicated Repairs Advisor roles to deal with all incoming repairs, which has had a positive impact on our repairs performance.

Fairness and respect

To ensure fairness and respect for all task force participants, we established preferred communication methods, working with tenants to establish appointments for engagement which suited them.

At the end of the investigation, the Task Force were asked whether they would take part in the process again. All participants said that they would.

Equality Diversity and Inclusion

Throughout this process we have provided accessible support, to meet the diverse needs of our tenants, allowing a cross section of tenants to scrutinise this service. Opportunities to take part included:

- Online surveys

- Onsite interviews
- In person interviews
- Telephone interviews
- Online sessions / meetings
- Out of hours appointments

SAP review summary and signoff

On 24th April, the Scrutiny Audit Panel met to review the Scrutiny Taskforce report into communication at EHA.

The feedback highlighted in this document covers a wide range of EHA tenants. Most ages and types of property are included.

It appears from the comments and percentages that EHA are already maintaining high standards of service and most tenants appreciate this. It seems EHA are improving services at a fast pace.

Of course, every policy has its weaknesses but we believe that EHA is listening and are aware of areas that need improvement and these will be addressed going forward.

In our opinion, this is a huge step in bringing EHA and its tenants closer together.

We are happy that the Taskforce followed all guidelines in producing this report. I therefore ask that the Board accepts this Document and any recommendations associated with it.

May we also congratulate the team on a job well done.


Chair, EHA Scrutiny Audit Panel

MANAGEMENT RESPONSE

Recommendation	Action Lead	Management response	Agreed timescale
General			
1. Implementation of a new ' Communication Standard ' <i>for tenants and staff to use as a framework for all communication, timescales to manage customer expectation, and to ensure staff provide updates where the standard cannot be met</i>	EIO/ CSM	Draft standard progressing. Final draft based upon staff and tenant views to be agreed by staff and Taskforce before roll out. To be shared in August's Viewpoint once approved.	End June 2024
2. Data collection and recording - gather, record and use communication preferences <i>'General needs does not mean no needs': recognise, respond and appropriately record vulnerabilities to provide (or signpost to) additional support.</i>	Tenant Dataset Group	- Ongoing tenant dataset project, led by CO – new tenant profiling forms agreed and rolled out for all new tenants. This is ongoing work and will continue as everyday business. We aim to gradually collate EDI data from our tenants, through the incorporation of the new Tenant Dataset form and the recording changes which are being made to MyAccount and our housing management system. - Work planned to begin gathering data from all existing tenants by Sept 2024 latest.	In place and ongoing
3. Customer service training – for all staff around new service standard, and establish a	HR/ Complaints	Training programme to be developed based on key issues raised by Taskforce via Skill Gate, staff away	Ongoing training

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consistent approach across departments: • <i>Name and department when answering calls</i> • <i>Voicemail – who to contact team/ officer in absence where urgent (not just switchboard if possible)</i> • <i>Deliver bad news honestly and in a timely manner – just be honest when something can't be done</i> • <i>Work with customer to establish solution – 'how would you like us to update you, what's the best time to call etc?'</i> • <i>Where required, following up telephone conversation with a written communication</i> • <i>CRM training to be provided</i> • <i>Specific training/ guidance around mental health, dementia, autism, neurodiversity, ADHD, Autism etc.</i> • <i>More consistent use of preferred communication methods – i.e. use of text messages</i>	Officer	day, CHAT sessions, team meeting sessions as well as in house/ external training and resources. Ongoing work with Customer Advisor Team to develop an agreed customer charter to reflect EHA Values, and in line with ASID test. Charter also aligns with the 'Attitudes, respects and rights' HOS recommendations. The charter will be shared with all complainants to aid clear customer expectation. 4 x Housing 2024 sessions – CHAT training for all staff around history of Social Housing, regulatory standards, HOS Spotlight report – Relationship of Equals, all sessions focussing on importance of communication.	programme currently being established by HR team
4. Promotion and publicity – raise EHA's profile locally, 'tell our story', good news and achievements <i>work to reduce potential social housing</i>	CX	Agenda item for discussion/ action on routine Management Team agenda added from June 2024	June 2024

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<i>stigma, misconception that social housing is for 'people on benefits', at risk of homelessness</i>			
5. MyAccount improvement in functionality and reliability for tenants <i>to increase consistent use and to free up telephones for those who can't access portal:</i> <i>messages to be checked regularly, acknowledged and responded to in line with communications standard</i> <i>MyAccount for to replace unnecessary letters/ mandatory communication</i>	CSM/ RM/ IT	- IT to investigate reported issue with Taskforce member to address any issues - Guidance to be given to officers/teams who monitor MyAccount notifications – HMW to produce new guidance for CA staff	End June 2024
6. EHA website improvement in functionality and accessibility <i>to increase consistent use and reduce need to contact EHA with non-urgent queries to free up telephones for those who can't access portal:</i> <i>to allow tenants to manage tenancy out of hours, access to account as well as all tenancy information</i> <i>Ensure site is accessible - browse aloud etc on new website once developed</i>	DoO	Establishment of a project group, to work with external project lead to support development of new site. Will require some involvement from IT team, but needs to be led by Customer Service. Realistic dates to be considered, but look to have new website live by no later than October 2025.	October 25
7. 'Faces to names' – more information on website about staff roles and responsibilities	EIO	Team photos to be taken at EHA Staff Away Day, July 2024	July 2024

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<i>team photograph and general contact – currently just executive team profiles</i>		Added to existing website, and team focus' included in Viewpoint periodically thereafter	August 2024 onwards
8. Automatic emails – from messages to EHA's 'enquiry' email <i>outlining EHA's new communication standard as well as sign-posting if the query is urgent</i>	CSM/ EIO/ IT	- Standard response text to be drafted and agreed incorporating communication standard info - IT to implement once approved	July 2024 August 2024
Internal communication			
9. Improve internal team communication around tenant issues following the introduction of 'hybrid working' <i>More consistent use of CRM – to ensure all ongoing enquiries are logged</i> <i>3CX status updates to provide clarity for Customer Advisors to support tenants with query</i> <i>Access to visiting officer diaries, to allow for cross team approach for welfare and ad-hoc visits</i> <i>Team phone groups – where direct contact with an officer fails, call automatically diverts to wider team</i> <i>Out of office – replies include other team member/ a named contact</i>	DoO	Improvements in place by October 2024 – questionnaire to all staff to establish barriers to existing use, and follow up to introduce improvements	Oct 2024

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External communication			
10. Customer Service Training for Repairs Operatives: to ensure approach to EHA's Customer Service is replicated by our contractors, within contract. <i>(Contractors represent EHA, and do not always provide same level of customer care – just because EHA pays for the work, shouldn't mean tenants who receive the service should accept poor level of service)</i>	RMM/ HR	Deadline TBC until new RMM in post mid-May.	TBC
11. Repairs confirmation – Text/ email appointment confirmation with job number upon each report of a repair. <i>(to reassure tenants job is in hand, with a clear timescale for resolution and reference to check progress on MyAccount if possible)</i>	RMM/ IT	Deadline TBC until new RMM in post mid-May.	TBC
12. Who may visit your home: Regular updates around which contractors EHA works with <i>(not just when awarded initial contract – who you can expect to attend your home on behalf of EHA)</i>	EIO/ RMM/ PCFM	- Clarification to be added to existing website - Contractor details to be shared periodically in Viewpoint	End June 2024