

The future of Open House

Background

Open House was first published in 1988 with the aim of providing an effective means by which the council can communicate with residents living in its 16,204 homes. In 2016, it became an on-line (electronic) publication with an option for tenants and leaseholders to 'opt in' to receive a printed copy posted to them, creating a saving to the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) of approximately £50,000 per annum.

Open House is also available to download from the council's website and the resident involvement Facebook page. Copies are also distributed to all Councillors and all Croydon libraries.

The publication helps to promote key initiatives and reinforce key messages e.g recycling & waste disposal, is a mechanism for consulting residents on proposed housing policy or strategy changes and enables the council to meet the regulatory requirement of ensuring that 'information and communication is appropriate to the to the diverse needs of their tenants'.

1. Recommendation

1.1 The Panel is asked to comment on some proposed changes to the future publication of the Open House newsletter for tenants and leaseholders in order to:

- further improve value for money
- increase readership of the publication
- increase number of residents signed up to receive Open House electronically

2. Summary

2.1 Currently, just 1,400 households have opted in to receive Open House. As documented in this paper, the cost of printing, produce and distributing Open House at present is high, given the limited number of households it reaches.

This report proposes that Open House newsletter, currently an A3 8-page publication, is replaced by a shorter A4 4-page version, which is printed in colour, and distributed four times a year to tenants and leaseholders. Tenants would receive Open House with their quarterly rent statements, to achieve a saving on postage.

Over the next 12 months, we would anticipate a gradual transition so that the majority of tenants and leaseholders (including those currently signed up to receive printed copies of Open House) receive the online publication. Regular signposting to support for residents who want to improve their digital skills would continue to be feature within the 4 page scaled down version of the publication.

2.2 Tenants would receive Open House in their quarterly rent statements to achieve a saving on postage.

2.3 Current cost per edition of Open House:

- Design: 8 page A3 colour newsletter: £1,791.51
- Print **700** copies: £1,133.26
- **Total per edition: £2,924.77 per edition**

2.4 Future cost per edition (under new proposal):

- Design; A4 colour, 4 page newsletter using design template. No chargeable costs
- Print **16,500** copies: £1,000.56
- **Total per edition: £1,000.56 per edition.**

3.0 The proposed change

3.1 It is proposed that the A3 8-page printed edition of Open House is replaced by a shorter

A4 4-page version, which is printed and enclosed with rent statements sent to tenants and leaseholders in all 16,204 council tenants and leaseholders four times a year.

3.2 An online version of Open House would be published at the same time on the resident involvement pages on the council's website and emailed directly to residents who have signed up to receive newsletters electronically. This will no longer be just a duplicate of the print copy as it is now but would include multi-media content, video and signpost readers via links to other web pages, including pages on the council's website.

3.3 The printed 4 pages sent to all tenants and leaseholders would contain news about key council initiatives e.g. recycling & waste disposal, strategy changes and any other consultations or news in order to meet the regulatory requirement of ensuring that 'information and communication is appropriate to the to the diverse needs of their tenants'.

3.4 Residents who currently receive printed copies of Open House – currently around 600 - would be invited to sign up to receive the online version with an explanation of the benefits of doing so and what support is available to help them get online.

3.5 The publication will feature its usual combination of articles relating to council news and features designed to target different demographic groups and to encourage more content inspired and produced by residents.

3.6 Over the next 12 months, we would anticipate a gradual transition so that the majority of tenants and leaseholders (including those currently signed up to receive printed copies of Open House) receive the online publication. Regular signposting to support for residents who want to improve their digital skills would continue to be feature within the 4 page scaled down version of the publication.

Rationale for change

- 3.1 Whilst Open House is sent to around 1,400 households (electronically and by post combined) and residents can download the publication from the council's website, more needs to be done to ensure we are engaging directly with all our tenants and leaseholders.
- 3.2 Articles can often be dated due to the time involved in production.
- 3.3 The overall proposals are in line with the council's digital wide strategy to help residents access digital technology.
- 3.4 47% of residents who completed the 2016 STAR survey have internet access.
- 3.5 Tenants, who have access to the internet, use a range of devices to access the internet with smartphones (70%), laptops or PCs (66%) or tablets (37%) being the most popular.

4. Outcomes

- 4.1 More regular and consistent communication with all Croydon tenants and leaseholders
- 4.2 Greater value for money
- 4.3 Open House and the Open House Online newsletter to share branding to help residents easily recognise communication from the council's resident involvement team and news relating to their housing services.
- 4.4 Proposals support the council's digital inclusion strategy to help residents get online.

Digital inclusion

In the 2016 STAR survey, around one in seven Croydon tenants felt that the council could provide help with digital skills, providing access to equipment and a range of other measures (13% to 15%). A digital inclusion strategy is being developed to support these residents.

The transition will be gradual and it's important that residents without online access or whose preference is to receive paper copies of Open House continue to be accommodated.

The purpose of the refresh is not to exclude any residents with whom we currently engage, but to make much widespread engagement possible through reducing production costs.

As is the case now, paper copies of Open House will continue to be provided to Croydon libraries and councillors.

