



Communication Strategy

2009 - 2012

Communication is any means of spreading information and encouraging responses.

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Aim of This Strategy

To ensure all internal and external communications are effective

To provide successful mechanisms for two way communication

To provide guidance to staff on methods and style of communication

To develop a framework to enable targets to be set and the quality of communication to be measured

To ensure information about Argyll Community Housing Association (ACHA) is open and accessible

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Principles for all communications

ACHA's Accessibility Guide

This one page practical guide to content, style, availability in alternative formats is included as Appendix A. It is distributed to all staff for their use when writing to ensure clarity.

Openness

In addition to our statutory requirements ACHA will ensure:

That it is open and accessible in all its dealings whilst maintaining the confidentiality of our clients.

The minutes of the Board of Management and four Area Committee meetings are available in our offices once they have been approved.

A list of items approved by the Board of Management is regularly provided to staff and to the Tenants Panel.

The ACHA Chief Executive has a column in the tenants newsletter and is always happy to talk to staff and tenants about issues concerning them.

All senior staff names and contact details are made available on the website and in reports concerning their areas of responsibility.

Duty officers' names and photographs are clearly displayed at all area offices.

That suitably reviewed and commented performance data is published to our website following submission to the Board of Management.

The Tenants Panel is involved in policy development and standard setting and through the annual Tenant Participation Questionnaire the Tenants Panel are asked a direct question on the openness of ACHA as landlord.

A clear and honest report of our activities and performance is published and widely distributed annually.

The weekly compiled Press Summary is sent to the Chief Executive, Directors and Managers to be cascaded as necessary as well as the Tenant's Panel to ensure awareness of press coverage in all areas.

Details of stage 3 complaints made against ACHA are published along with a statement on the action taken and any alteration to ACHA policy or activity that has resulted.

Format

The format of communication will be chosen with regard to cost (including both production and delivery), environmental impact and suitability for the intended audience.

Obscure formats will be avoided. (X)HTML is preferred for both emails and information available on the internet.

The open Portable Document Format (PDF) will be used for self contained electronic documents that are not to be edited.

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Emailed information will be printed and forwarded to staff without access to a computer by their line managers.

Use of Data to Enhance Honest and Open Communications

Performance indicators are compiled monthly and reported to SMT. The figures recorded are used to populate Area reports and Board reports. The indicators recorded have been chosen as a reflection of how ACHA is performing in relation to published targets. The targets are set by ACHA and also regulatory bodies. The figures allow easy comparison across time and with other organisations.

The figures, once agreed by SMT, are shared with tenants and others. They are presented in context. Graphs and diagrams are used wherever possible.

The Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) are published to our website quarterly.

The annual report formally reports these figures which are also published by regulatory bodies.

Customer Care Charter

This leaflet was designed in conjunction with the Tenants Panel and explains the standards of service to be expected when contacting ACHA, reflecting our commitment to providing high quality services focussed on individual needs. The leaflet covers tenants' rights in terms of customer services, our standards, how staff will perform their duties, the quality of our offices and the standards to be expected in terms of written and verbal communications. There is also an explanation of ACHA's complaints policy and procedure. The leaflet is available at all local offices and on the ACHA website. Large print versions are on the wall in all sheltered housing complexes

Complaints Policy and Procedure

Developed in conjunction with the Tenants Panel and approved by the Board of Management. The policy incorporates national standards and good practice and provides mechanisms for the reporting of complaints to the organisation but more importantly channels for improving delivery and quality of services as a result (where this is appropriate). ACHA aims to develop feedback mechanisms to inform tenants of the number and type of complaints received and where these have resulted in improvements to services. Working with tenants or other members of the community who have complaints is extremely important to ACHA to achieve a greater degree of customer satisfaction.

The policy is available at all ACHA offices and on our website.

Minutes

The minutes of the Board of Management and Area Committee meetings are available to the public in our offices following agreement.

The form of the minutes is clear and understandable.

It is expected that technical terms will be used at the meetings, where this is the case an explanation of the terms will be attached.

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Internal Communications

- Staff
- Board of Management
- Area Committees

The definition of Internal and External is based on the 'internal' group being made up of people who may have access to confidential or sensitive information (for example contract information or confidential information relating to staff). ACHA strives to be as open and accessible as possible and therefore all other information is available to everyone in the community.

Staff

This section covers communication with staff on a formal and informal basis and providing mechanisms for staff to flag issues 'back up the line'.

Role of Communications Group

The group meets monthly and is made up of representatives from each department within ACHA and from each area office (if possible). As representatives each member of the group will consult with colleagues to achieve as much input from as many members of staff as possible. This group aims to represent the views of all staff and comments are always welcomed, indeed this element is essential to the success of internal communications.

The role of the group is to guide ACHA towards achieving the highest standards of communication across all that the Association does. This includes:

- production of the quarterly staff newsletter
- production of the quarterly tenants newsletter
- input into the monthly staff update email
- production, development and implementation of this strategy
- production of the Annual Report
- production, development and update of ACHA website
- development and monitoring of press reporting of ACHA activities
- monitoring of all ACHA communications

Role of Staff Liaison Group

The Staff Liaison Group has been set up for the purpose of providing a two way communication process, involving and engaging employees through consultation, enabling them to contribute to the success of the Association.

Some of the benefits that can be gained from this group are listed below:

- Increased staff involvement in projects and commitment to Business issues
- Improved implementation of change where consultation has taken place

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- Improved working relationships with staff and managers working together
- Better communication between staff and managers
- Personal development for representatives, for influencing and communicating
- Compliance with our statutory duty to consult
- Improved working practices by suggestions and ideas from staff being encouraged and listened to

Annual Staff Conference

The conference content and method of delivery will be designed in consultation with the Staff Liaison Group and the Communications Group. The content should be both informative, fun and of interest to all staff where possible. Feedback from staff will define the content of future conferences.

Staff Newsletters

This is produced quarterly by the Communications Group from information, articles and photographs put forward by staff. The newsletter is delivered to all staff by email and in paper format where this is not possible. The aim of the newsletter is to keep staff informed of new initiatives, personal achievements, new staff, those departing and to reflect the interests and diversity of everyone employed by ACHA. It is hoped that the newsletter will be light hearted and readable. A copy of the newsletter is put into the 'information pack' for the Board of Management.

Monthly Staff Update Email

This email is sent to all staff monthly. The content is related to the majority of staff with examples where possible.

It is acknowledged that the subjects raised may not all relate to good news. All articles should focus on positive future outcomes.

The content should be snappy and to the point with links to more in depth information provided.

The format should suit printing as well as on screen reading.

The updates are archived on the public folders.

Feedback is actively encouraged.

Contacts for information are included.

Clear headlining is used to allow easy retrieval of information.

Attachments are to be minimised.

Responsibility for issuing the update lies with the HR manager but the position of compiler is rotated amongst staff.

Typical content includes:

- ACHA news
- Reinforcement of previously publicised information

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- The announcement of all new policies
- Hints and tips or other light hearted articles
- Health and Safety updates

Chief Executive's Roadshow

The Chief Executive visits each area every quarter providing an update on his view of the Association and inviting questions and comment. All staff are required to attend.

Board of Management

The Board of management governs the association and sets the strategic direction of ACHA, and sets budgets and approves policies.

A graphical report on corporate performance is issued to the board along with Director's comments every two months.

An information pack is issued to coincide with every board meeting.

Area Committees

The area committees approve plans, agree area budgets and take decisions on local issues.

A graphical report on area performance is issued to the committee along with Area Manager's comments every two months.

Vacancies

The time critical nature of staff vacancies mean they are notified to all staff by email as and when required.

Guidance notes

Guidance notes on specific topics are issued as necessary by email to those staff affected and archived on the public folders.

The purpose of the note is clearly stated in the introductory paragraph.

Links to more in depth information are used.

The use of ad hoc group emails is avoided where possible.

Emails

The management and use of emails is outwith the scope of this strategy however guidance is issued to all staff on effective use.

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External Communications

ACHA Website www.acha.co.uk

This communication tool offers excellent accessibility at low cost and should be used wherever possible to publish information and encourage feedback. However, it does not replace all other forms of communication. While use of the website is encouraged by the Scottish Housing Regulator the specific accessibility problems that electronic access causes must be borne in mind. Any document published on the website will be made available in other formats on request (see section on availability on page 3). ACHA will support tenants and wider community to have the tools and develop the skills necessary to use the web.

The following are those we seek to communicate with:

- Tenants
- Tenant Groups
- Professional bodies
- Other Registered Social Landlords
- Local partner organisations in the public and voluntary sector
- Newspapers, radio, professional journals and other media
- ACHA Members (people in the community who have applied and been accepted as a Member of ACHA)
- Argyll communities

Tenants

ACHA's latest **Tenant Involvement Strategy** was adopted on 12 February 2009 and contained within it is a section on information aims:

ACHA will:-

1. Provide tenants with full, clear and readily available information regarding their tenancy, including: the terms and conditions of their tenancy; their statutory rights under the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 and other legislation; ACHA's policies, service standards, performance information and a tenants handbook.
2. Consult with tenants and obtain their feedback in effective and structured ways: publishing the results of any consultation.
3. Make use of a wide range of options for communicating with and consulting tenants.
4. Have in place a policy on information standards (Customer Care Charter).
5. Have in place a policy and procedure for complaints.

The Tenant Involvement Strategy was produced having consideration to the document **National Standards for Community Engagement** (Scottish Community Development Centre / Communities Scotland 2006).

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Information on tenancies is provided to tenants through the **Tenants' Handbook** (2007 – 2010) whereas information relating to new policies and services, performance information and general interest items are published in the quarterly **tenants' newsletter**, Tenants first. ACHA's **website** (www.acha.co.uk) aims to give a comprehensive view of all aspects of ACHA including recent news stories and press articles. There is an archive of policy and procedure material and an interesting photo gallery.

General information leaflets are available to tenants from all ACHA offices and these include the Customer Care Charter, How to Get Involved, Free Grass Cutting and Membership Application Forms. In winter months there is also the Frost Protection leaflet available.

To seek views from tenants we mail a **Repairs Satisfaction Form** to all tenants on completion of a repair in their house. This asks tenants to give us information on the quality of service from reporting the repair through to its completion to be returned to us in the prepaid envelope. This information is invaluable to us in order to improve the repairs service. A random sample of tenants is also phoned and asked for their comments.

A **Three Yearly Tenant Satisfaction questionnaire** will be given to all tenants to gain information on where we could be performing better and to ask for information to assist us to plan for future services. The results of the questionnaire will be published in our tenants newsletter. Further sampling of tenant opinion will be undertaken between questionnaires.

The **Customer Care Charter** sets out the standards of service to be expected when contacting ACHA staff, either in person, in writing or by telephone and hopefully reflects our commitment to providing high quality services focussed on individual needs.

Registered Tenant Groups

The Tenant Involvement Strategy sets out how ACHA will deliver on its commitment to tenant participation including the support of Registered Tenant Organisations. There are currently a number of **Registered Tenants' and Residents' Associations**, most of these groups are registered with ACHA and receive support and funding to enable them to operate successfully.

The **Argyll Tenants Panel** is made up of representatives of the tenants associations and meets once a month. The Panel is a hard working group of individuals who take time to be involved in the development of new policies and procedures and take an active role in national politics and housing policies.

The **Tenants' Consultation Register** is a tool for encouraging tenants to participate in an informal and flexible manner usually through postal questionnaires.

Professional Bodies

ACHA welcomes communication with professional bodies such as the Scottish Government, Scottish Federation of Housing Associations (SFHA), Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH), Financial Services Authority (FSA), Tenant Participation Advisory Service (TPAS). Successful communication with professional bodies ensures our representation on the national housing agenda and also assists ACHA to deliver the best possible services.

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Advice Agencies

The principal national advice agency operating within Argyll and Bute is Citizens Advice Scotland and the Argyll branch now operates an independent housing specific advice service. ACHA is a proactive member of the Argyll and Bute Advice Network (ABAN) which actively seeks to have all advice agencies in Argyll as members. ABAN are pursuing the development of services to include an online referral system and quality standards for all advice giving agencies.

Registered Social Landlords and local partner organisations

The four local housing associations in Argyll (ACHA, West Highland Housing Association, Fyne Homes and Dunbritton Housing Association) have established a joint working ethos and have celebrated the success of the partnership HOMEArgyll, the first common housing register and common housing policy in Scotland. Other partnership areas are being developed including a joint regeneration strategy (More than Housing Strategy), joint provision of staff and committee training and regular meetings take place to discuss local and national housing issues.

Communication between local housing associations is generally good but there is always scope for improving these links and ACHA will support measures to share information. Communications between ACHA and other partner organisations, for example Argyll and Bute Council, are being established and improved upon and we will encourage information sharing and ease of access to information wherever possible.

Newspapers, radio, professional journals and other media

All senior staff receive training in dealing with the media.

Press releases are issued at least weekly following a standardised format to ensure the local press, local radio stations and professional journals are kept informed of successes, milestones and innovations.

A pro active relationship with the local press is being developed in order to better understand how ACHA can use this medium to communicate with all communities within Argyll. There has been significant press interest in ACHA since its inception not only as the largest social housing landlord in Argyll but also as one of the largest employers and a business with a huge annual turnover.

ACHA is honest and takes full responsibility for its actions when dealing with the press.

ACHA Members

The Annual report is issued to each member, attendance at the Annual General Meeting (AGM) is encouraged and the opportunities to join the Board and Area Committees are made clear.

Membership Pack

Information on the expectations placed on ACHA members is issued to all members. Members are kept informed of significant developments and are encouraged to participate fully in the running of the organisation.

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Annual Accounts

The Report of the Board of Management and Financial Statements are published on ACHA's website following agreement at each year's AGM.

Annual Report

A report on the progress of the association will be published each year. The report will be available electronically and in paper format. The report will convey its message graphically whenever possible.

Report of the Board of Management and Financial Statements

A type signed copy will be placed on ACHA's website in PDF format.

Annual General Meeting (AGM)

The date and location of the AGM will be published widely and attendance by members encouraged. The format will allow for involvement by all, specific needs of attendees will be met wherever practical with regard to cost. A report on the AGM will feature in the tenants' newsletter and a press release will be issued prior to and following the meeting.

Jargon

The association has a guide to the jargon likely to be encountered reading technical documents relating to housing. This is shared widely.

Data Protection

All communications will have regard to privacy and Data Protection legislation and guidance.

Guidance will be made available to staff by the association's data controller.

Recruitment

Feedback from Argyll and Bute residents confirms that ACHA should continue to insert the following statement along with details of the post to be filled in local papers when advertising for staff. This not only gives potential applicants a flavour of the Association but also promotes the organisation to the whole community.

ACHA - Putting Tenants First.

ACHA wishes to recruit customer focussed individuals, seeking a rewarding and challenging career in a forward thinking housing organisation. These posts are key to delivering the quality of services our customers deserve. In return, we will reward the successful applicants with a generous remuneration package, modern work practices, family friendly 'people policies' and the opportunity for personal development and training.

Where space is tight or costs prohibitive this can be reduced to:

We're on target to create homes and places across Argyll & Bute where people want to live. Can you help us to achieve that vision?

The following statement is included at the end of all job adverts:

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ACHA is committed to being an equal opportunities employer. We value diversity in our workforce and welcome applications from all sectors of the community.

Induction for New Staff

An induction session is given to all new members of staff which includes information on the following:

- Organisational/Departmental Structure charts
- List of Members and what they do
- List of Communications Group
- List of Staff Liaison Group
- Personal Development Review notes
- Authorised time off including annual leave, flexi leave and public holidays
- Employee Handbook
- Health & Safety Policy
- Harassment & Victimisation Policy
- Equal Opportunities Policy
- Disciplinary procedure
- Grievance procedure
- Code of Conduct
- Pension Scheme information
- Union information
- Staff Uniform Order Form
- Jargon Guide
- Tenant Participation information
- The most recent Tenants' Newsletter
- The most recent Staff Newsletter
- The handout from the most recent Chief Executive's roadshow
- Information on Scotwest Credit Union

Contractors

ACHA works with a broad range of contractors and clearly sets out the relationships with contractors in the contract terms, design and specifications.

Where appropriate, targets and key performance indicators are set and monitored.

Monthly meetings are held with contractors to discuss contract progress and any issues.



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Named points of contact within each organisation are agreed to ensure appropriate contact between all levels of ACHA and the contractors.

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SMART targets

SMART stands for Specific Measurable Achievable Realistic and Time-constrained, when targets meet all these criteria it means we can tell if we achieved them or not.

ACHA will regularly be reported on in a positive light in local and national publications.

All internal minutes will be available on the public folders within a week of approval.

All area committee and Board of Management minutes will be available in area offices within a week of approval.

The Association will be awarded Investors in People Status by 2010.

Tenants will indicate an awareness of the association and their rights in the tenant survey or other questionnaires when issued.

Tenants will be consulted on all matters that significantly affect their situation before a decision is made.

ACHA's staff will be informed and positive about their work and the association, this will be reflected in the results of the staff survey.

The wider community will be aware of the work we undertake and the benefits this brings.

Staff, members and tenants will be informed of all major decisions through the next available publication or meeting.

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Guiding Standards

Open and Accessible?

Communities Scotland November 2007

National Standards for Community Engagement

Scottish Community Development Centre / Communities Scotland 2006

ACHA Tenant Involvement Strategy 2007

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Appendix A

Communication: Accessibility Guide



Content

Use plain language

Write short sentences, no more than 20 words long

Use everyday words rather than jargon or abbreviations

Use personal pronouns. For example 'we will give you the information that you need' rather than 'the landlord will provide tenants with the required information'

Use graphs, charts, pictures and glossaries where this makes things clearer

Include the full wording of acronyms the first time an acronym is used in a document eg Registered Social Landlord (RSL)

Style

The document must be created in a way that is easy to read

Type size should be either 12 or 14 point, electronic font size must be easily adjustable

On paper use the font Arial, for electronic documents use Verdana

'left align' all text

Don't stretch or squash the ACHA logo

Make paragraphs short and use bullet points to make it easier to read

Put text on a plain background, not overlaid on to images

Availability in alternative formats

All ACHA documents intended for the public must contain the following statement which should be in 16 point typeface if possible:

'If you would like this document (leaflet) in larger print, in an alternative language, on audio cassette, paper or in an electronic format or you would like someone to help you read it or to explain it please contact *[name and telephone number of contact]*.'

These alternative languages should be included where space permits:

{alternative community language statements to be inserted when available}

Offer alternative methods of communication and correspond in the manner the customer wants. Telephone calls can be backed up by letters.

Consider how you are communicating:

Are we communicating in the right way, would an email, telephone call or meeting be better?

Is all the information included relevant to the person you are writing to?



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Is the message clear?