

Wards affected:

General

Strategy Group – 10 July 2014

**Task Panel Review of Written Formal Communication
with Service Users in Terms of Clarity, Tone and Fact**

Access and Communication Issues

1. Purpose of Report

To consider the recommendations of the Task Panel Report – Review of Written Formal Communication with Service Users in Terms of Clarity, Tone and Fact – as accepted by Scrutiny and Improvement Committee.

2. Advice

<p>That it be RECOMMENDED:</p>	<p>That in relation to the Scrutiny and Improvement Task Panel report the following be decided:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. The People's Panel becomes involved in an annual review of the Council's printed and online communications, in the form of an annual user survey.2. The Council's editorial and writing guidelines for staff are reviewed and enhanced in line with elements of the Gov.uk style guide and other national Plain English guidance and promoted through the Council Courier and Davnet.3. Officers involved in preparing benefits and council tax communications (print and online) are offered a tailored training session in writing for a public audience4. Benefits and council tax information on the DDC website is reviewed following a user-testing exercise5. The Council writes to the Government to invite comment onto how it expects councils to communicate Housing Benefit and Council Tax awards having regard to the Gov.uk style guide.
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3. Introduction

Scrutiny and Improvement Committee received a Task Panel report at its meeting on 15 April 2014. The task panel had been charged with a review into written

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communication by DDC with service users. The review was carried out in order to:

- establish whether written communications sent out from DDC is clear and written in Plain English
- determine if replies/notifications to a resident's enquiry/application from DDC is answered in a way the resident will understand
- ascertain if a sensitive and friendly approach is taken that meets the needs of individual residents.

4 Information

The Task Panel conducted interviews with key members of staff in order to ascertain their views and also carried out an online survey to gauge the views of members of the public. A copy of the Task Panel's report is given in the Annex.

4.1 Task Panel Recommendations

Five task panel recommendations were accepted by Scrutiny and Improvement Committee. This included an additional, fifth recommendation agreed at its meeting on 15 April 2014 (Minute Reference: SI/14/14).

Task Panel Recommendation 1 - Involve the People's Panel in regular reviews of the quality and clarity of the Council's print, web-based and digital communications.

The People's Panel comprises more than 350 members who are willing, from time to time, to give views on local public services with no obligation to provide feedback. Panel members are consulted on an as-and-when basis and responses are often subjective.

The Council produces hundreds of individual copies of printed materials each year and digital communications, such as information on web pages, is updated as and when required, sometimes daily, weekly, or monthly. If regular reviews are pursued on this scale it would have significant resource implications in terms of officer time to conduct and co-ordinate.

It is suggested that the People's Panel could become involved in an annual review of the Council's print and online communications. This review could take the form of a survey including questions on clarity and quality of information.

Task Panel Recommendation 2 - Make use of the Gov.uk style guide in regular reviews of formal communications (print and online).

The Gov.uk style guide is a useful resource for officers and Members in developing and promoting the use of plain English across all teams. The Council's own editorial style guide could be reviewed with a view to enhancing its content in line with elements of the Gov.uk style guide. Guidance from other Plain English guides used by local authorities could also be explored and incorporated. The use of these guidelines could also be promoted further to staff via Davnet and the Council Courier.

Task Panel Recommendation 3 - Develop good writing and Plain English training opportunities for staff in housing benefit and council tax teams. This should include formal training, and informal peer-to-peer learning by conferring with other authorities or public sector agencies.

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Although most of the formal written correspondence prepared by staff in the Revenues and Benefits Service is based on templates containing legislative wording in line with Government requirements, a training session on good writing and Plain English could be of use for staff, particularly for key officers also involved in producing information leaflets and updating the website. These officers could subsequently share their learning with other team members.

In addition best practice and innovative ideas can also be sought from partner authorities via the Northamptonshire Revenues and Benefits Managers Group and the County Communications Group.

Task Panel Recommendation 4 - To redesign the website pages for Council Tax and Housing Benefit, following a period of user-testing, to give clearer and simpler access to information about benefits.

The website plays an important role in providing the public with clear and accurate information about the Council's services and continuous improvement of its content is encouraged.

A fact-finding exercise, based on the most popular benefits and council tax queries, could be devised to user-test the web pages, with a view to identifying and making improvements where required.

Task Panel Recommendation 5 - That the Council writes to Government to invite comment onto how it expects councils to communicate Housing Benefit and Council Tax awards having regard to the Gov.uk style guide.

It should be recognised that most of the formal written correspondence prepared by staff in the housing benefit and council tax teams is based on templates containing legislative wording in line with Government requirements.

It is therefore suggested that providing councils with greater flexibility to interpret and adapt these communications would serve to improve clarity and tone of formal correspondence and public literature.

5. Implications

5.1 Financial – The proposed actions can be met from existing approved budgets.

5.2 Personnel – The proposed actions can be resourced within the existing approved establishment.

5.3 Legal/Constitutional – None arising from the Advice.

5.4 Environmental – None arising from the Advice

5.5 Policy – None arising from the Advice.

5.6 ICT – None arising from the Advice

5.7 Crime and Disorder – None arising from the Advice.

5.8 Human Rights – None arising from the Advice.

5.9 Equalities – Improving the clarity and tone of formal written communications in line with Plain English guidance will make it easier for residents from all socio-

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economic groups and educational backgrounds to understand information about Council services helping to reduce any potential adverse impacts.

6. Conclusions

The Task Panel report identifies some scope for improvement around the development of good writing and use of Plain English by officers and members, particularly in relation to housing benefits and council tax information.

These can be addressed by the five recommendations proposed in Section 2, which aim to improve and further promote existing editorial and writing guidelines for staff, offer additional training to key officers and review the clarity of benefits information available online to members of the public.

Tony Gillet
Resources Manager

Background papers:
SI.150414/2 (Appendix to this report)

Previous minutes:

Contact Officer: Becky Hutson
Extension 2404

Annex: Task Panel Report

Wards affected:

All

Scrutiny Committee – April 2014

Review of written formal communication with service users in terms of clarity, tone and fact

Communication and Access Issues

1. Purpose of Report

The purpose of this report is to outline the findings of a review into written communication by DDC with service users. The review was carried out in order to

- establish whether written communications sent out from DDC is clear and written in Plain English
- determine if replies/notifications to a residents' enquiry/application from DDC is answered in a way the resident will understand
- ascertain if a sensitive and friendly approach is taken that meets the needs of individual residents

2. Advice

<p>That is be RECOMMENDED:</p>	<p>That Scrutiny and Improvement Committee agree the task panel recommendations as follows:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Involve the People's Panel in regular reviews of the quality and clarity of the Council's print, web-based and digital communications.2. Make use of the Gov.uk style guide in regular reviews of formal communications (print and online).3. Develop good writing and Plain English training opportunities for staff in housing and council tax benefit teams. This should include formal training, and informal peer-to-peer learning by conferring with other authorities or public sector agencies4. Redesign www.daventrydc.gov.uk, following a period of user-testing, to give clearer and simpler access to information about benefits.
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3. Introduction

A number of Councillors have been approached by residents to interpret written communications sent out by DDC which they could not understand.

Many local authorities are actively committed to a Plain English approach to ensure clearer communication with their residents. The Improvement and Development Agency for local government also promotes the use of Plain English. As the Government's own Style Guide explains, Plain English isn't 'just a list of words to avoid'. It's an ethos, a way of writing, which signifies a commitment to public service. Without it, we risk losing trust and respect from local residents. Poor communications can lead to misinterpretation, confusion and concern.

4. Information

4a Consultation with residents

An online survey was carried out in October 2013 for 6 weeks. 26 residents took part – Appendix A.

When asked 'Have you received correspondence from DDC in the last 12 months which you found difficult or hard to understand', 54 per cent said 'No' and 46 per cent said 'Yes'.

The source of the correspondence was primarily Housing and Council Tax teams.

When asked what it was about the correspondence that residents felt was unclear or caused them concern, replies included:

'Full of jargon that only a Council bureaucrat could understand'

'Too much paperwork before it went to the section I was interested in'

'I didn't understand it at all'

A number of residents reported that they were unable to understand from the letter whether or not a benefit had been agreed at all, and if it had, how much it was.

Another individual complained that correspondence arrived after payment had been made, causing confusion.

One resident reported on a general lack of correspondence and considered residents in the district were being 'kept in the dark'.

4b Consultation with the Revenues and Benefits Manager

Consultation focussed on two areas:

- Whether DDC's written communications with benefit claimants were as clear, concise and informative as they could be

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- Whether DDC's signposting role - the extent to which it gave context to the decisions it shared with residents – was as developed as it might be

In the course of the consultation, it was agreed that some improvements could be made immediately, and some could be explored further.

- A Local Provision Guide for Daventry District has been produced by the LSP Board sub-group for Welfare Reform, giving contact details for a range of services, including Job Club, Support for young people & young families, availability of Internet Access, Citizens Advice Bureau, local Food/Clothes Banks, Mental Health services and Drugs & Alcohol Support.
- Notifications of Housing Benefit from DDC to its customers now incorporate a paragraph advising customers to contact their landlord to check any outstanding rent payments. This will ensure they are clearer about what their rental liability is once Housing Benefit has been awarded.
- DDC contacted all four primary social landlords in the district and suggested they include a paragraph on tenants' rent statements to advise when any Housing Benefit is due to be credited to their rent account, to aid clarity. None of the four social landlords felt able to make this amendment to their letters. Their responses are highlighted below:

"We would not be able to amend our rent statements as requested, although any letters that are sent out do explain what their rent arrears are expected to be and what it would be if Housing Benefit did stop."

"It's probably not possible as not all recipients of Housing Benefit are on the same cycle - it may be too complicated to administer."

"I'm pretty sure this isn't something we would do. The statements we send out give the dates that each Housing Benefit payment covers, so the tenant could calculate their current net arrears by deducting expected Housing Benefit from the gross arrears. If we did make this change we could give tenants misleading information if their Housing Benefit entitlement changes without us knowing."

"We send out arrears letters only in line with dates Housing Benefit payments received and also put in an information sheet."

"Our Income Team leader has advised me that she has helped a number of our residents understand the information in the benefit letters and has also referred people back to DDC. She informed me that a lot of the information has to be included in the letters, so she was not sure how much of the letters could actually be changed."

We always get our active tenants' groups to proof-read our letters before they are sent out to check that they are understandable. Our group would be happy to look at any letters and suggest ways to improve them if you would like."

4c Consultation with Resources Manager

Consultation focused on how easily potential or current benefit claimants could access clear and useful information.

It was suggested that navigation of the current website design was not as logical or as straightforward as it might be for benefits claimants. The Resources Manager agreed there was always scope for improvement and this would be explored.

5. Implications

5.1 Financial Training and development costs for staff

5.2 Personnel

5.3 Legal

5.4 Environmental

5.5 Policy

5.6 ICT

5.7 Crime and Disorder

5.8 Human Rights

5.9 Equalities Higher standards of communication have a positive impact on equalities for residents by preventing discrimination. Good communications ensures that services offered by the Council are open and accessible to everyone.

6. Conclusions

Some improvements to the quality of the Council's formal communications with residents, particularly with benefit claimants, have already been made.

However, there is still scope for further development and improvement, as per the recommendations.

Background papers:

Previous minutes: