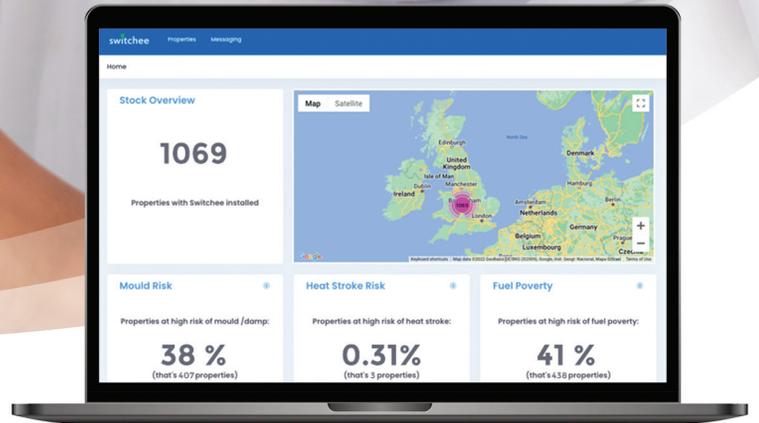


switchee



HOW TO IMPROVE COMMUNICATION IN SOCIAL HOUSING **WHITE PAPER**

We live in a world that is changing faster than ever – technology is increasing the pace of change in all aspects of our lives. We are ever more connected, and expectations have increased as a result. Despite huge strains on housing providers to increase the number of properties they can provide; residents are now expecting an even more personal experience with communication to match.

The huge improvements that have been made in one-to-one communication in the last decade have resulted in a massive network of connected individuals all expressing themselves simultaneously. With ever more connected residents, however, comes ever-increasing expectations. We are going to explore innovative approaches that have developed to help both large and small organisations improve their communications with their residents. It is more important than ever for housing providers to get their communication right at scale.

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If you only have a couple of minutes - we've summarised the key points into a very short overview.

1. TYPES OF COMMUNICATION

In many ways, the approach to communication in social housing [hasn't changed a huge amount](#) in the last few decades. There have been some additional channels added as options for most housing providers, but the primary channels for communication have remained the same.

Letters

Letters have been the main method of communication since social housing began. It is by far the simplest method, requiring only minimum information about the tenant. This, combined with the very scalable nature of letter-sending, has kept letters as the most used form of communication in housing today. The primary concerns with letter sending are:

- High costs when sending at volume
- Receiver accuracy - due to multiple household members who can open the mail, or new tenants receiving the previous tenants post
- The inability for the housing provider to know the desired recipient has read and understands the communication
- The delay in letter replies, if they are required
- At a time when housing providers are tasked with reaching Net Zero targets, large amounts of printing on a regular basis does not support this goal

Due to the very public nature of the post, anyone in a household could read communications sent through to the property - or worse still, read communications meant for the previous resident. A lack of transparency is the main concern surrounding letter communications.

Phone calls

Phone calls are widely used in social housing. Again, like letters they do not require much tenant information.

Further benefits of phone calls are as follows:

- Confirmation of response, or not as the case may be
- The ability to record calls builds accountability, and visibility in to the system, providing evidence of agreements
- Speaking can help form a personal relationship with the resident and housing provider
- Allows for a more open format of information to flow with freedom to ask questions
- Mobile phones mean residents can be contacted even when they aren't at home

The drawbacks are as follows:

- Can be labour intensive, requiring multiple people to support
- Can be time intensive to make multiple phone calls and many may have to be repeated if there is no answer
- Difficulty keeping an up-to-date record of phone numbers
- Can be a costly option
- Taking notes on the call can be a challenge to do whilst actively listening

Text messages

Text messages are the obvious solution to the issues surrounding phone calls. They allow for the same level of transparency and traceability, but with a significantly reduced cost. Text messages are significantly less expensive to send en masse than phone calls and do not require the same level of staffing resources.

In the early 2000s, there was a genuine feeling that text messaging might be the way of the future for housing providers. Unfortunately, they suffer the same issues as phone calls - where accurate and up-to-date phone numbers are required to use this communication channel. This can be an issue at a portfolio level as important communications cannot be missed for even the smallest percentage of residents. In addition, too many messages from housing providers may mean residents disengage and simply ignore new communications.

In-person visits

Another classic form of communication - simply visiting a property to deliver information in person. This solves many of the problems above - as accurate phone numbers are not required and the housing provider has the highest level of visibility on deliverability and engagement.

This option does however have a number of limitations:

- Very labour intensive requiring multiple team members
- Very time intensive to speak to a significant proportion of residents
- Difficulties recording data accurately whilst also listening to the resident
- Conducted during the work day so residents may not be home
- Some residents may not be comfortable being candid
- Other residents can be overly vocal

This is not a viable option for delivering portfolio-wide information.

Social media

Social media has become a standard communication channel over the last few years. Nearly every housing provider is now on one form of social media or another – and it has shown to have a significant impact on resident engagement. Social media does not require housing providers to know the information of a resident up-front and provides a scalable, one-to-one communication platform. Unfortunately, it lacks two things. It is significantly impacted by digital inclusion (those that are most vulnerable and might need the most help are likely to feel incapable of asking for it over social media), and it can be extremely public. Every housing provider has experiences of disgruntled residents using every public post to chastise the organisation for their lack of action over a particular issue.

In-home devices

Over 1/3 of UK housing providers have now chosen to also communicate with their residents via an in-home Internet of Things (IoT) device, such as Switchee. Utilising an in-home device to communicate with residents overcomes a significant number of the issues presented by other communication channels.

These are as follows:

- Being physically located in the property ensures you know the message is arriving at the correct location
- Use of it improves digitisation of the housing provider and their residents
- It provides full traceability and accountability with a full data log
- It can enable resident responses
- It is often fast and after installation requires no additional cost to use
- Much less labour and time intensive

The drawbacks however, can be as follows:

- Only residents with the devices in their homes can be communicated with
- Residents may require education on how to use the devices correctly
- Residents need to be in the home to receive messages (unless available via a mobile app)
- Can have a higher initial cost to purchase and install

2. CHALLENGES WITH DELIVERY

One of the largest areas of waste for any housing provider when it comes to communication is sending a message without connecting to the correct person. This can take many forms – for example, a phone call to a resident whose number no longer exists or a letter to a resident's home which is never opened and instead simply thrown away. Delivery in digital communication comes in the form of bounces and read rates – both of which demonstrate whether or not your message is hitting the right target.

Improving your communication delivery is important for a few different reasons. Firstly, it saves housing providers significant resources. The most obvious area of savings is in the cost of creating and delivering physical communications. Letters cost money to write, print and send. If the letter doesn't reach its intended target then those resources have been wasted. A study by the [Data & Marketing Association in 2018](#) found that an internal mailing list had an average response of only 9%. That means that 91% of your letters are not achieving their desired outcome – making each letter effectively 10 times more expensive. That money and time could have been better spent either on another task or a more effective form of communication.

Ensuring these communications are received helps reduce both the number of resources needed to get in touch, as well as the time spent executing additional re-communication campaigns. When a message isn't received, it also significantly increases the number of appointments that get missed.

According to a study conducted by CIH on behalf of Mears, they had an average of 31% no access appointments – costing them an estimated £2.4 million a year. Maintenance, both planned and emergency, requires advanced notice to ensure resident's plans can be changed to accommodate the new event in their calendars. Failure to gain access to a property wastes resources both in terms of communication cost and engineer or resident liaison officer time in attending appointments that are likely to be no-shows.

Finally, you have the cost of having to double or triple up on communication. To ensure that the greatest number of residents are reading the information being transmitted to them, housing providers are likely to send multiple copies of the same communication. This leaves residents who read the first communication feeling bombarded and increases the likelihood that they will feel the same in future. Ideally, communication to residents should be viewed as impactful and important – but this degrades over time as tactics to ensure higher read rates become more aggressive.

3. IMPROVING YOUR DELIVERY

One of the best ways to improve delivery is to take advantage of the digital nature of some forms of communication. A primary issue with letters is the inability to track engagement. For the most important of documents, you can get signed postage – ensuring at least that the letter was delivered to the correct address and received – but this does not guarantee that the letter has been read.

This form of sending, however, isn't viable at scale due to the prohibitive costs associated with signed postage. As a result, appointment letter sends are nearly always untrackable. Digital channels, on the other hand, have delivery metrics built in to their functionality. Text messages can be tracked, ensuring they are received – not to mention the fact that texts can be up to 300 times cheaper.

Other forms of digital communication have the same – email and in-home IoT offer ways to track delivery, engagement and responses, without any additional cost to the housing provider. Unlike text messages, IoT and email also enable for unread and resend capabilities, which helps reduce message fatigue. Phone numbers and emails, however, can go out of date. This leads to an unfortunate side effect of traditional digital communication channels.

Utilising these systems requires you and your organisation to ensure that every resident's contact details are kept up to date. This is especially difficult in the social housing space because there is lower than average adoption of internet and smartphones. This doesn't even factor in the fact that between 2019 and 2020, 145,000 social households moved property.

Luckily in-home IoT devices do not have the same disadvantage. These devices are locked to a properties address, cannot be removed from the property and are often in positions of very high visibility in the property. Smart thermostats, like the Switchee device, replace a standard thermostat in a central location and have two-way communication capabilities - allowing you to take advantage of the instant and trackable nature of digital communication without the costs and drawbacks associated with both traditional and digital communications. This ensures the resident in the property both receives the message as well as engages with it.

4. RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

Once you've improved your delivery rates – the next hurdle housing providers face is getting the right level of engagement. Where delivery is ensuring that the right person gets the communication, engagement is about ensuring that the resident reads what you are sending them and in many instances, responds.

- For direct mail, [one research piece](#) by the Data and Marketing Association found that only 20.8% of people opened a piece of mail addressed to them within 28 days. This is not a good sign for time-sensitive appointments
- For phone calls, this means getting an engaged listener who will take the appropriate action
- For digital channels, this means ensuring residents read and understand the message in its entirety and take the appropriate action to respond

Residents who are disengaged can cause problems that can span their entire tenancy. Where an engaged tenant will make emergency repairs, scheduled maintenance visits and inspections relatively hassle-free, a disengaged resident is going to be nearly impossible to confirm and allow access to their property for appointments. On average, it takes anywhere from 2 to 3 visits to gain access to a property – with a percentage of those eventually progressing to the legal stage to ensure access into the property. Ensuring your residents are engaging with your communications helps to foster a relationship of co-operation. It also helps you keep them up to date on the latest challenges they might be facing when it comes to their benefits, housing allocation or any number of other issues you might need to discuss with them.

There are also financial implications to consider. An engaged resident is much more likely to take on board a housing providers advice (for example when a resident's heating pattern might be causing a risk condensation, damp and mould being present or developing). The long-term savings that come from this can be in the tens of thousands. Missed appointments are also less likely with a resident who has received and read a message and who feels they have been given ample time to adjust their schedule. All of these elements work to create a much more productive and functional relationship that benefits both housing providers and residents equally.

5. THE BENEFITS OF PERSONALISATION

There are a few ways to improve your message engagement. The first big improvement that can be made is through personalisation. The communications where you can take a more personal approach depend on your organisation. A national housing provider, for example, is likely to see huge improvements in engagement when they personalise communications on a geographic basis. Local tenants want information on local issues. Sending unnecessary communications about changes that won't affect a tenant is a great way to get them to tune your communications out.

Lots of national communications – like rent statements and company announcements can also be personalised with local information. Smaller local organisations are likely to see more improvements through personalisation based on experience – for example, those with a history of suffering condensation, damp and mould can be sent communications specific to their circumstances. Certain levels of personalisation are possible with traditional communication channels (by grouping residents into large, but similar, audiences). Unfortunately, truly one-to-one personalisation can only really be achieved with digital channels – especially when it comes to deploying it at full scale. According to a recent survey, 88% of respondents reported seeing a measurable improvement in their engagement metrics when deploying personalisation in their messages. These lessons from the private sector can and should be used to improve social housing communication.

6. GETTING TO THE ROOT OF THE PROBLEM WITH A/B TESTING

A/B testing is the process by which you directly test one option against another, using those results to inform future communications. For example – your business is likely sending monthly rental reminders. These communications have a direct impact on your profitability as a business and as such, they need to be as effective as possible. Utilising an A/B test, you can test different communication styles, content and even layout to see which improves rental arrears rates the most. This process can also go on continuously – improving your regular communication incrementally.

With modern technology, this process is even more straight forward. Big tech companies like Microsoft, Facebook and Google are conducting tens of thousands of controlled experiments a year – often involving millions of their users – to better understand their services and how to improve them. A/B testing has also been a key component in Netflix's steady march towards their goal of perfection – with their now-famous user interface. Email software, text automation platforms and IoT devices all provide you with systems that you can utilise to A/B test messages. Not only does this allow you to optimise your existing communications for more effective content, but it also gives you concrete evidence about the communication and language style that works best with your resident audience.

Carol Jones, Corporate Communications Director at the Sage Homes says that "If we don't have empirical data to back up our claims, we're just another idiot with an opinion". For larger businesses, this information can be shared with other areas of the company to improve their communications and for smaller businesses, this can help to inform content guidelines and tone of voice.

These guidelines help to keep content consistent between users, as well as smooth over any staff transitions. It also helps you to build a tone of voice for your business that your residents will come to trust.

7. TIMING IS EVERYTHING

Getting a message to a resident at the right time increases engagement. If a resident receives a communication right at the moment when they are leaving to pick their children up from school, for example, the likelihood that they will appropriately engage with its content is low. They aren't in the position to divert their attention to your message. On the whole, you only have one chance to get your message across. If a resident didn't listen to your first phone call, they aren't likely to look fondly on follow-up messages.



With 24% of all email opens occurring within the first hour, ensuring your message is delivered at the right time couldn't be more important. This is where digital communication channels can help. With their ability to track opens and time open, a digital communication channel can appropriately optimise a message to be sent at the right time for each individual. This is a huge departure from the days of letters where housing providers were reliant on the letter arriving without any other important information to distract a resident.

8. SUMMARY

Housing providers today face significant challenges across their entire organisations with shrinking budgets and increased demand. Communication doesn't have to be one of the areas where you suffer. The solution to a lot of the issues facing housing providers is to utilise different communication channels for different types of messaging. Taking advantage of where a particular channel is strong can help ensure your message is seen across your entire portfolio - without the massive costs.

Technology has a key role to play. It can not only help to reduce the workload and cost, but also ultimately improve the quality of communication your residents receive. With the commercial world getting closer and closer to full-scale automated one-to-one communication, housing providers should ensure they aren't left behind. Housing providers should be improving their relationships with residents by providing quicker, cheaper, more effective means of communicating with them. Ultimately this will help to improve their financial position, help satisfy their social mission and improve the lives of their residents.



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