

APPENDIX 2

	Date: 31/03/2020	Meeting Name: Asset Management DMT Housing and Modernisation SMT Cabinet Member for Housing
Item title:		Final report of the major works communication and consultation task and finish group
Ward(s) or groups affected:		All
From:		Tenant and Homeowner Involvement Team Leader

RECOMMENDATION

1. That the contents of this report be noted and considered by officers of the council with responsibility for communication and consultation in relation to major works projects. In particular, it is recommended that the contents of this report be shared with Asset Management Divisional Management Team, Housing and Modernisation Senior Management Team, and the Cabinet Member for Housing.
2. That the content of this report and its appendices be noted by those officers of the council involved in the convening of task and finish groups involving residents.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

3. At its autumn conference in 2018, the London Borough of Southwark's Homeowner Council heard expressions of concern from various conference attendees regarding communication and consultation practices around aspects of major works projects. These centred on billing (Section 20 service charge notices), but also included broader concerns regarding the tone and manner of communication around major works. Several delegates expressed the view that communication from the council was often terse, formal and lacking in empathy. In response to these concerns, the Strategic Director for Housing and Modernisation, Michael Scorer, endorsed proposals from the Homeowner Council that the issue of communication and consultation around major works be probed by the council in order to understand better exactly what the issues are, and respond accordingly.
4. Following the autumn conference, a meeting of relevant service heads took place on November 30th, 2018, to consider how best to take forward this project. It was acknowledged at this stage that little could be done to alter in any meaningful way the serving of Section 20 service charge notices, as these conform to strict legal requirements. However, it was agreed that a task and finish group would be set up with a view to investigating a number of major works-related communication and consultation issues. These included:

- a. *Acceptance of the problem to be fixed by major works*: How do we get 'buy-in' that there is a problem that needs addressing?
 - b. *Options for fixing*: What are the options for addressing the problem? What evidence do we use to inform this choice?
 - c. *Options appraisal*: What are the factors to bear in mind when deciding the appropriate option? – Cost/abortive cost? Value for money? Aesthetics? Disruption? Timescale? etc.
 - d. *Delivery*: When and how will the project be delivered? How will it be monitored?
4. It was also agreed by the service heads that the task and finish group would include tenants of the council as well as homeowners. This way, both differences and similarities between the different tenures could be identified and explored.
 5. At the beginning of 2019-20, a project team was assembled from within the Tenant and Homeowner Involvement Team. The project team then recruited the Task and Finish Group (TFG), using the team's contact database. The TFG met three times between June 2019 and January 2020. These three meetings considered the following themes:
 - What are the key issues for you, in respect of major works? What do you understand by 'consultation'?
 - Of the issues identified above, how many are, in fact, communications issues?
 - Consideration of the draft final report.

FINDINGS

6. The first meeting of the TFG elicited a lot of feedback on the question of key issues for residents vis-à-vis major works projects. These are attached in Appendix 1. Interestingly, there was little noticeable difference of opinion expressed by homeowners and tenants. Also, whilst the project team were initially guided by a set of questions and issues agreed by officers to investigate (see paragraph 3 above), an overarching principle was to allow residents to frame the issues in their own terms. This meant that the feedback generated reflected the concerns of residents first and foremost, and not those of officers.
7. A number of powerful themes emerged from the work of the TFG, each of which engenders a number of questions for the council to consider, when addressing the issue of communication and consultation around major works. They include the following:

- a. **interests** (material): who are the interested parties in major works projects? What is the nature of their interests?

Such questions can seem irrelevant to officers (and some residents), given that major works are carried out principally for the benefit of residents. However, in terms of communication and consultation, any perceived lack of openness in relation to the question of interests fuels suspicion and undermines trust. This is particularly so in complex and sometimes controversial processes of regeneration;

- b. **confidence** (in people and processes within LBS): are council staff, systems and procedures up to the task of effectively overseeing major works projects, including in relation to communications around major works?

Concerns were expressed by several members of the TFG regarding the ability of council staff to effectively administer major works contracts. Whilst much of this concern centred on a perception that council staff involved in major works contracts are themselves open to manipulation by technically more 'savvy' contractors, this concern also related to the ability of staff to communicate effectively and empathically with residents;

- c. **knowledge** and knowledge deficits (including in relation to LBS staff): to what extent, if at all, does the council draw on the knowledge of local residents when drawing up plans for major works? When and how does it do this?

A strongly expressed sentiment amongst the TFG was that the council does not make best use of the knowledge and experience of residents when drawing up major works project proposals. Several members of the TFG indicated that they have worked at some stage in their lives in the construction industry. In addition, others made the point (backed up by anecdotal evidence) that they had lived on their estates for a long time and had acquired a lot of local knowledge and experience, including in relation to the built environment. Such residents felt that they could play a bigger role at earlier stages in the development of project proposals, to the benefit of both council and residents;

- d. **reasoning** and evidence: how robust is the evidence base for major works projects? Who decides what is and what is not valid and valuable evidence, in this context?

Questions were asked by members of the TFG about the quality of evidence used to inform major works project proposals, and the ability of council officers to communicate subsequent reasoning to residents effectively. Specifically, a perception shared by many members of the TFG was that sometimes expensive, complex major works contracts are entered into by the council on the basis of seemingly weak technical

evidence – evidence residents felt sometimes could, and should, be challenged;

- e. **power** relationships and dynamics: who ‘pulls the strings’ in major works projects? What is the context in which key decisions are made?

Closely related to the issue of interests, the question of procurement of major works contracts generated a lot of response from the TFG. The group recognised that commercial confidentiality does present genuine obstacles in terms of complete transparency in relation to procurement. However, questions were asked about the extent to which ‘commercial confidentiality’ has become a stock response to enquiries around procurement. In addition, a lack of clear understanding regarding the procurement process itself means that many residents experience major works as something of a mystery, and simply do not understand how key decisions in relation to such projects are made;

- f. **impact** (recognition of): to what extent do council officers understand and appreciate the level of disruption and inconvenience caused by major works projects? How is this understanding and appreciation communicated?

Amongst the views expressed by the TFG was a sense that officers of the council (and contractors working on behalf of the council) do not communicate sufficient sensitivity towards – and empathy with – residents when undertaking major works. Indeed, some members of the TFG felt that an unspoken sentiment – ‘you should consider yourselves lucky to be getting new windows, bathrooms etc...’ – was at times more effectively conveyed to residents by staff and contractors than a genuine sense of empathy. Consequently, whilst the council acknowledges and recognises the negative impacts of disruption and inconvenience in general terms (e.g. in policy documents), this understanding is not, it seems, always effectively cascaded down to staff and contractors working on site;

- g. **the affective** (i.e. feelings, as distinct from perception and reasoning): residents need to feel respected and valued if they are to participate as partners of the council in major works projects: what, therefore, is the council’s approach to ensuring residents – and their views and knowledge – are respected?

Related to ‘f’, above, the final key point to emerge from the TFG concerned the realm of the affective. Given the highly technical, ‘hard’ nature of major works projects, this is something that can easily be overlooked or underestimated. Essentially, the TFG expressed the sentiment that residents need to feel respected and valued, both as customers and partners, in major works projects. Quite how this translates into an actionable point on the part of the council is open to further investigation and interpretation. Nevertheless, challenging as

such an exercise is likely to be, the TFG seemed to imply that this is a challenge worth addressing.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

8. The issues raised by the TFG, and the questions generated, present something of a challenge to the council. Whilst some of these issues (e.g. interests, power) don't appear at face value to be communications and consultation issues, the second meeting of the TFG confirmed that – to a greater or lesser extent – these issues do indeed have significant implications for communication and consultation around major works. For example, explaining who the various parties to such projects are, and their role and interests in relation to these projects (including those of long-term, large contractors), enables greater understanding of how the parties – and interests – relate to one another to deliver major works projects.
9. The themes identified in paragraph 7 above were considered by the project team in relation to the council's current policy document on major works consultation ('Putting Residents First'). An analysis of this document suggested that there is currently relatively little in it that addresses the themes identified. Consequently, the project team recommends that the council begins the process of reviewing 'Putting Residents First' in the light of the themes identified above, and their associated questions. It further recommends doing this in partnership with residents. The Tenant and Homeowner Involvement Team will be happy to work with Asset Management to this end.

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Appendix 1

Major Works Communication and Consultation Resident Task and Finish Group - Feedback from Group Exercise, 12th June 2019

What are the key issues for residents?

- Poor inspection/supervision
- Ineffective oversight
- Conflict of interest – contractors undertake pre-programme surveys?
- Quality of work
- Lack of design intelligence
- Complexity of documents
- Loss of amenity
- Letting of contracts
- Sell down the river – big boys
- Defects periods too short
- Misplaced and unenforced warranties
- Community Impact – things not done
- Bills
- Timescales
- Internal LBS communications
- Reason
- Scope of works
- Essential works
- Following policy (not....)
- Massive disruption
- Lack of transparency
- Excessive use of variation orders
- Contracts awarded to ‘mates’
- Ineffective use of technology
- Communication
- Competence of council staff
- Council money making
- Lack of knowledge of site/location
- Council is not interested in what went on previously

Consultation – what does it mean for you?

- Group of people getting together to discuss some issue
- Formal consultation with residents about work that is actually done
- Informing people about what is going to happen
- Initial decision to initiate works
- Everyone getting together to discuss the future of the estate
- Fact finding stage
- A meeting of all involved and affected by project
- Loads of lies
- Opportunity to share background and history of estate
- Lifespans of work
- Council is not interested in what went on previously
- Look forward
- Acknowledgement of learning from the past
- Wrong/inadequate works in the past
- Legal obligation
- Policy obligation – transparent, keeping their word, 'spend the money as if it was their own'
- Tenants never given individual costs/programme costs of the works
- Two way communication – ideas, respect and partnership
- Project that affects community
- Bring empathy and humanity into project
- Consultation is not negotiable

Appendix 2

Reflections on the Task and Finish Group process relating to Major Works Communication and Consultation.

At its final meeting on January 30th, 2020 (to which relevant officers of the council were invited and several attended), the Major Works Task and Finish Group spent time reflecting on the process of working in such a context. Given the council's new resident involvement structures (which include proposals for consulting with residents through task and finish groups), it seemed pertinent to take time to review the task and finish process, with a view to ensuring such processes in future benefit from the experiences of this one.

The key observations and feedback made by those attending the final meeting of the group are as follows:

1. **Overall, a positive experience.** Participants were in agreement that the exercise succeeded in obtaining acceptance of issues from both officers and residents, thus providing a basis for future collaborative work in this area (e.g. Putting Residents First, Homeowner Improvement Plan etc.).
2. **The need to identify impact.** Those present felt that – for such processes to gain credibility – participants (and residents generally) needed to be kept informed as to the impact of their work. Without this, participation can seem a waste of time.
3. **Clearer, shorter timescales.** This particular Task and Finish Group was set up as an ad hoc project, running alongside existing workstreams. It was also an experimental project, insofar as the staff involved had no previous experience of facilitating task and finish groups. One consequence of this was a drift in the project timescale that resulted in the project becoming evolutionary in nature. Future such projects will need to be more clearly defined at the outset in terms of timescales, roles and responsibilities, resources and skills, anticipated outcomes.
4. **The need to thank participants.** Those present felt that it was important officers facilitating task and finish groups provided a letter of thanks to participants at the end of the project, acknowledging their time and input, which is given freely.
5. **The first session yields the greatest feedback and greatest attendance.** In keeping with the work of another task and finish group set up within Housing and Modernisation (District Heating Task and Finish Group), the first session of the Major Works Communication and Consultation Task and Finish Group yielded the greatest volume of feedback from a large number of attendees. Thereafter, numbers

dropped off (particularly from amongst tenants – in both task and finish groups). Quite what this indicates in terms of managing future such projects is not at all clear.

6. **An appropriate task and finish topic?** The purpose of task and finish groups is to address an issue by undertaking a specific task. A typical task and finish group in housing might look at, say, the merits and challenges associated with 'digital by default' when communicating with residents about their tenancy. In such a context, the group gives a particular 'answer' to a set question. Looking at the broader issue of communication and consultation around major works was, with hindsight, too broad a topic for a task and finish group. Whilst the process was positive, and yielded valuable outcomes in terms of identifying issues and feeding into council plans and strategies, the topic itself might have better been undertaken as a focus group, in which a broad issue is narrowed down into a number of specific issues that need further addressing. This, indeed, is the key outcome emerging from the work of the Major Works Communication and Consultation Task and Finish Group.