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A place to live out of

Hanover pioneers
online networking



Hanover World - the shape of things to come for housing providers

Hanover Housing Group is leading the way with a new, online social network for their residents, staff and other stakeholders.

'Hanover World' launched in March 2008 and already has dozens of users and online groups covering topics such as writing, photography and crafts.

"We wanted our new website to do things for people" explains Gavin Cansfield, Hanover's Director of Strategy and Improvement. "So we built the interactive parts of our site around what residents are really interested in."

Project Manager Dean Fraser-Phillips consulted with residents about what they wanted. This included making 'punk collages' of magazine clippings, which highlighted people's desire for an aspirational, lifestyle focus.

Dean also worked with residents to look at existing social utilities like Facebook, and decided to create Hanover's very own online system

using www.ning.com. Hanover World has all the familiar features that allow users to create groups, send messages, write blogs and share photos and videos.

The new site is also starting to yield real business benefits. "We're gaining real customer intelligence that we can use to improve our services." explains Gavin.

Hanover describes itself as a 'far-flung family', with 20,000 properties from the Isles of Scilly to Durham. Half the organisation's staff are aged over 50 and more than 50% work on their own. With this profile, Gavin and Dean are convinced that online and digital communication has a big future.

And what about the risks? Is Hanover worried about exposing itself to 'cyber attack' from dissatisfied customers or malicious

users? "We want to hear what people have to say about us" says Gavin. "But the residents who helped to design the site felt that it shouldn't take the place of our normal policy and procedures for complaints."

Dean thinks Hanover World signals an important change in the organisation's culture and approach. "It means we offer a place to live out of, not just live in."

What's your organisation doing about social networking?

Need help to take your first steps? Contact us at engage@bridge-group.co.uk or 024 7656 0440.





Orbit residents have their say about the switch to Sovereign Housing Association

Explaining change

Involving residents in mergers and acquisitions

We spoke to two newly-merged organisations about their experiences of engaging residents in major corporate change.



Sheila Hyde is the Managing Director of Spirita, which brought together 10,000 homes from Rushcliffe Homes, Metropolitan Housing Trust's

midlands division and Walbrook Housing Association.

Consultation on the merger started by discussing the potential benefits with small groups of residents already involved in the separate organisations. Special newsletters, roadshows and a one-day residents' conference followed, to work out the details of new, local structures for involvement and the organisation's name and brand.

To start with, most people wanted reassurance about rents and basic

rights. But as things progressed, the focus shifted to a more fundamental review, which boosted the level and quality of customer involvement. Six months on, Spirita got further feedback from residents, staff, partner agencies and other stakeholders. This helped them develop an improvement plan to target effort and resources on key priorities.

"We took this consultation seriously," said Sheila. "We wanted to keep the best parts of each organisation, and we were clear with residents that the merger was about creating efficiencies and real change."

The Bridge Group helped Spirita to develop its new brand and produced newsletters to keep customers and staff in touch with the change process.

Meanwhile, Orbit Group was busy consulting and involving residents in changes to create the new 'Orbit East'

and 'Orbit Heart of England'. The latter involved a merger with South Warwickshire Housing Association and the transfer of 850 homes to Sovereign Housing Group.

Orbit issued a special newsletter and survey to all the residents affected by these changes and followed this up with meetings and three regional conferences for residents.

Residents of the homes transferring to Sovereign were keen to retain staff with whom they were familiar. Keeping the Direct Labour Team for repairs was a key issue for South Warwickshire customers joining the Orbit Group.

Orbit's Neighbourhood Development Advisor Simon Lieberman said:



"We wanted to show it would be business as usual from the launch date on 1 April 2008. But we also wanted residents to understand that it would take time to see and feel the real benefits of the merger."

Top tips for engaging residents in mergers and acquisitions

- **Communication is vital.** Plan how you're going to connect with residents well in advance and make everything that you send to people clear and distinctive.
- **Involve residents early.** Customers need to fully understand the benefits of and reasons for change. Their support is crucial to success.
- **The merger is only the start.** Keep on consulting and communicating with customers as the new organisation settles in.
- **Put the vision into practice.** Residents want and expect to see real results.
- **Evaluate your success.** Formally review the new arrangements and involve everyone affected by the change.
- **Keep it positive.** Bringing organisations and people together in new ways can refresh the way you work and raise horizons.
- **Follow the guidance and rules.** Good Practice Note 11 sets out the Housing Corporation's expectations. Housing transfer organisations need to check the terms of their agreement with the local authority.



High impact



Good practice on impact assessment

After a slow start across the sector, some housing associations are really getting to grips with the need for and benefits of impact assessments of resident involvement. This is all about showing what difference the thousands of hours and thousands of pounds invested in involvement really makes.

Westlea Housing Association (part of the newly-formed GreenSquare Group with Oxford Citizens Housing Association) has followed up its recent award-winning Tenants' Business Plan with a colourful and comprehensive Impact Report. This sets out exactly what the association said they'd do, alongside evidence of outputs, outcomes and impact to report on change and success. Each example is illustrated with a handy coloured roundel to show how customers' input has influenced services, accountability or the community.

Westlea's Head of Neighbourhood Services, Shirley Davies, said "We're working directly with our residents to help them understand the true value of their input. We want to benchmark our service with other providers to see whether what we're doing is good value for money."

See www.westlea.co.uk for the Impact Report and latest Residents' Business Plan, which breaks down residents' priorities to identify the things that older and younger people particularly want.



Soha Housing meanwhile has produced a very clear and well-written Impact Report, which also highlights how each part of their involvement strategy has improved services or accountability and built social capital.

Soha's Tenant Involvement & Marketing Manager, **Lisa Morris**, stressed the need to keep careful records of how much time and money you spend on each piece of involvement, so you can judge value for money. Lisa explained "I have a detailed working file with background information and clear objectives, aims, and schedule of work for each activity. This has taken a lot of time and effort to develop, but it's invaluable! I've used this to carry out informal staff training to increase awareness about resident involvement."

The Soha report poses the punchy question 'So what?', which goes right to the heart of good impact assessment. Showing that you've done lots of work is not enough - you really need to prove that it's made a positive difference.

Find out more about our engagement consultancy and all The Bridge Group's other marketing, design and public relations services at www.bridge-group.co.uk

Engaging people



Bridge Group Associate, Chris Barlow, consulted with tenants in Castle Point Borough Council in south

Essex after they voted against transfer to a new housing association.

The 66% 'NO' vote came as something of a surprise to the council after all the pre-ballot contact and research showed healthy levels of support for the proposed transfer of all its 1,600 homes. So what changed?

Following an initial telephone survey of 150 Castle Point tenants, Chris led focus groups and telephone conferences to delve deeper into the issues that made up people's minds.

It emerged that people's attitudes were fixed fairly early in the process and also reflected memories and views of a previous transfer ballot in 1994. This meant that even significant promises of extra

investment, improved services and community initiatives were not enough to persuade a majority of voting tenants that transfer was the right option in Castle Point.

"We were surprised and disappointed by the vote" said Housing Assistant Director Richard Chew. "But the Bridge Group's post-ballot research has helped us to understand the result better and get a clear picture of what residents most want for the future. We've also managed to attract some new people to our Tenants' and Leaseholders' Forum and other involvement projects, which is a great bonus."



Another Bridge Group Associate, Linda Huckstep, helped South Staffordshire Housing Association,

with some sensitive consultation and communication about proposed redevelopment of a sheltered housing scheme.

The association called in The Bridge Group to support their resident involvement team in discussing the implications of redevelopment plans with older residents, their families and carers.

Linda helped staff to prepare for personal visits to each resident; anticipating how people feel and the questions and concerns they might have. She then debriefed staff after visits and collated lessons to inform the association's decisions and plans.

South Staffordshire Managing Director Sue Rowley said:

"The blend of hands-on support and advice we've had from The Bridge Group has been invaluable in managing this very sensitive piece of work. My team has gained great confidence from having Linda alongside them, and have built up a really positive relationship."

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Contact Ian Hembrow or Richard Lovelace on 024 7656 0440 or email engage@bridge-group.co.uk

The Bridge Group Limited

Concept House, 9 Orchard Court, Binley Business Park, Coventry CV3 2TQ

t 024 7656 0440 f 024 7656 0441 e info@bridge-group.co.uk w bridge-group.co.uk

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TheBridgeGroup