

Resident Scrutiny Panel

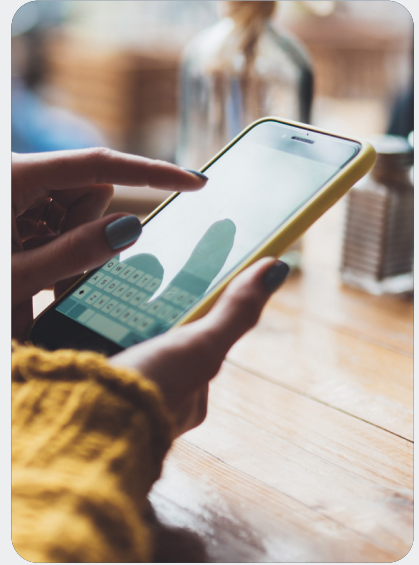
Review of the Southern Housing website



As part of its annual schedule of activities, the Scrutiny Panel agreed to undertake a review of the Southern Housing (SH) website.

Following the merger of Optivo and Southern Housing Group (SHG), a centralised website for Southern Housing has been created. As residents' use of digital channels to locate information and access key services increases (e.g. rent/ service charge information) it is becoming more important that the website offers a seamless and high quality user experience.

The Panel may choose to revisit this area as further development work is undertaken at a later date.



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Purpose and scope

The overall objective of the scrutiny was, based on a sample methodology, to assess whether the Southern Housing website is resident friendly and whether any enhancements could be made.

This desktop scrutiny considered three distinct areas:

1. Website searches: an exercise was undertaken to identify the top searches undertaken by visitors to the Southern Housing website; this was based on searches made in previous weeks. After reviewing the Southern Housing website, comparisons were made with several other external websites to compare these to provide any suggestions to make the Southern Housing website search more 'user friendly'. Searches were made using a desktop computer as well as a mobile device (the latter being the most common search method).
2. A review of how easy it was to locate Consumer Standards information on Southern Housing's website which is required to be provided by the Housing Regulator.
3. A high level review of process (including controls) in place to ensure Southern Housing's website reflects accurate, timely and relevant information. We also considered how management uses trend analysis and user feedback to assist in content development.

This scrutiny exercise did not consider the following areas:

- To avoid duplication, work being undertaken by the Resident Service Integration Project will not be duplicated as part of this review. The scope of the scrutiny will commence at the point when a user lands on Southern Housing's website and will end at the point when the user leaves the site and is directed to one of the 'portals' which falls under the remit of the Resident Service Integration Project.
- There is a separate investor relations micro website that is linked to the Southern Housing website, www.southernhousinginvestors.co.uk. As this review is focusing on the residents' experience, the investor relations micro website is therefore out of scope.

All recommendations and actions were agreed with management and progress updates will be provided at Resident Strategy Group (RSG) meetings.

Executive Summary

This Scrutiny was undertaken at a time shortly after an exercise had been completed to merge the legacy SHG and Optivo sites to create one 'Southern Housing' landing site.

This exercise was the initial focus of the Comms team and has taken up much time and resource post-merger.

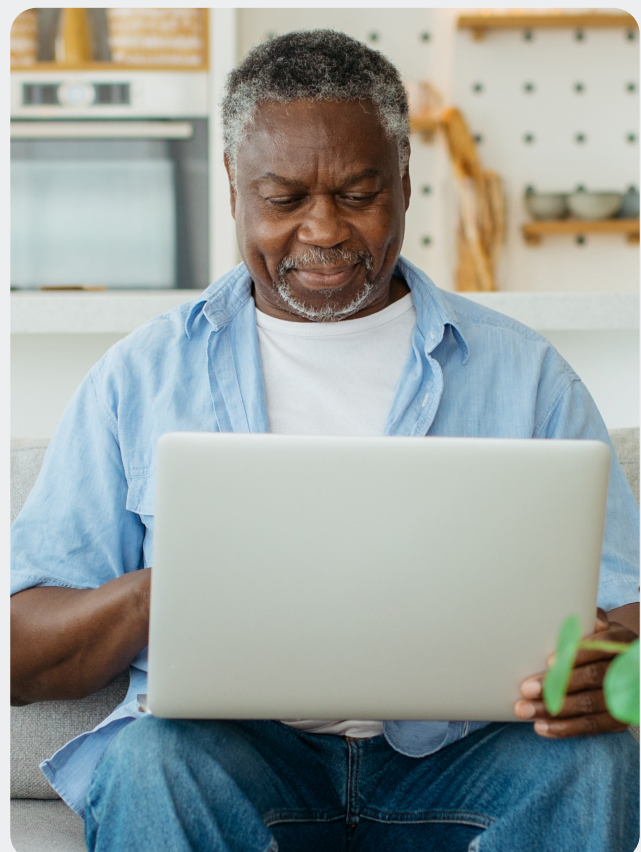
It's acknowledged that management saw this as 'stage one' in a wider exercise to enhance the website, and therefore were aware of some of the issues highlighted in this scrutiny. Our work should therefore be read in this context.

On balance, we found that the majority of information we tried to locate could be located on Southern Housing's website.

We do however **suggest several enhancements** which could be made to make it easier for residents to find information, ensure content on the website is relevant, accurate and timely as well as **the need to formalise the governance framework in which content is uploaded, maintained and 'owned' by staff** within the organisation.

Our review noted an opportunity to make the website less 'corporate' in nature and improve signposting, and cross-referencing within the site.

Greater use should also be made of trends/ analytics to assist in determining the site's content, and there is an opportunity to consider the use of Artificial Intelligence to assist the user to locate desired information.



Key findings identified in this review include:



Website strategy: the current website strategy is in the process of being refreshed/ developed. Consideration should be given to explicitly state that, whilst the website serves a number of stakeholders, Southern Housing residents are the primary audience. Our review of SH's website did sometimes highlight confusion as to which 'stakeholder' the information was aimed at



Suggestions to be considered following our review of both SH and external sites: our review of several external websites, and SH's own website highlighted some suggestions SH could consider adopting to enhance residents' experience of searching for information. **It is worth nothing that these are personal views of the Scrutiny Panel members and are therefore subjective. We did not conduct any wider sampling of residents' views as part of this scrutiny.**

Suggestions include:

- After having identified those areas most searched for by residents, there is scope to make this information more prominent/ easier to find on the website
- Consider making use of Artificial Intelligence to support Policy/ content searches
- Making the 'accessibility translator' more prominent
- Creating a dedicated 'complaints' section
- Utilising an 'A to Z' tool/ drop down to make searching much easier.



Improve access to some of the Consumer Standards, as required by the Housing Regulator: the majority of the Housing Regulator's Consumer Standard were locatable, however in some cases access to some information could be enhanced, for example by greater signposting or reducing reliance on sharing this within Policies.



Make greater use of the Communications Panel: greater use should be made of the Communications Panel in the development of the SH website to assess the content and accessibility of information on the website.



Using trend analysis to ensure the website reflects residents' demands: there are a number of opportunities to gather information to allow greater 'tailoring' of the website to users' needs, including:

- Monitoring the 'top searches' by users on a more frequent basis to ensure this information is clearly accessible.
- Gathering more feedback from website users. This should be both qualitative (e.g. through feedback mechanisms on the website) and quantitative (such as Google Analytics).





Formalising the process of uploading information onto the website

This would ensure greater 'accountability' over content and provide an opportunity to review content before going live. This could be achieved through:

- A more formal 'web content management system', including documenting 'ownership' of site content, specific areas of the website and who is required to 'sign off' before content goes live. Currently this is a less formal process based on existing relationships.
- Sign offs could formally confirm:
 - The correct language is used (customer/ resident/ other external party etc)
 - The message they want to share can still be communicated to the residents (accessibility).



Maintenance / Website content

Once uploaded, processes in place to ensure content on the website is up to date could be formalised, including:

- Continue to further develop an 'audit plan' to ensure ongoing independent review of website content and the 'content review' process. This could be undertaken by the Comms team, different parts of the organisation or the Communications Panel.
- Greater use of tooling: consideration could be given to using automated tools to assist in the management of the website, such as tools to identify broken links
- Consider gathering 'good practice' from across the site. Our review, for example, found some areas of the site were more 'user friendly' than others.



Observation

The need to be mindful of those who are 'digitally excluded' - one observation noted as part of this review was the aim to increase services on the website. This is in line with many other organisations; however we would like to remind SH of the need to remember those who are digitally excluded when services are offered.

This could be considered as part of an 'impact analysis' when pages are being uploaded to the website, or at the stage when the Comms team are approached to assist in any campaign.

