



An NFA briefing paper

Virtual and digital tenant engagement

NFA members' learning from keeping lines of communication with residents open during the pandemic

NFA Communication brief

December 2020; revised January 2021

SINCE the pandemic began in early 2020, the meeting, events, communications and virtual engagement industry has adapted rapidly. It is clear that a return to non-essential face-to-face meetings and resident-focused events will now not be possible until around Easter 2021. However, even when social distancing restrictions are lifted, our thinking around events planning and engagement work will have shifted considerably.

Virtual delivery has obvious benefits: savings on travel time and venue costs, more readily available speakers and the potential to reach a much wider audience at times that suit them. At the same time, not everyone can access digital communication — and this may be so for a higher proportion of ALMO customers than the general population; and in-person contact will always be the most powerful method of communication.

This brief is a first attempt to record what we and our members have learned so far about what works when digital and virtual communication is the only option, and to preserve knowledge that may be useful even when full social contact resumes.

Key learning points

'Virtual' cannot replicate 'live'

There is no way to replicate a live physical engagement event or meeting; and our Events Manager and many members have told us that best practice is not to try. Virtual event planning begins with asking 'what specific skill/knowledge/collaborative experience will participants take away from this?'. Combined with clear, focused promotion and the promise of short, well-paced sessions, this will bring in an audience that wants to be there.

Smart visuals and planned interactivity hold attention in virtual events. They are vital; an experienced presenter can 'read' a room of physical delegates and change pace in response to heightened or flagging interest. There are no such cues for virtual event presenters, so change of pace and sense stimulation has to be built into an event at the content planning stage.

Detailed and considered planning

Set meeting/event objectives with the audience in mind. Focus sharply on just one or two offers that will prompt the buy-in needed to drive bookings, attendance and participation. Make sure offers and session timings fit attention spans that are very much shorter in a virtual setting than at an in-person gathering.

How can the audience's attention be held in a way that will reduce the temptation to drift away or multitask? Interactive content, before and during the event — preparatory reading, questionnaires, online information video links, the promise of resource packs — are key. Consciously aim to engage as many of the senses as possible. Chunk down presentations into short and clearly signposted sections. Match platform and format to content.

Make it easy to book/attend.

Building engagement

Pre-event surveys, call-outs for questions, circulation of audience questions — all ways to build interest and anticipation ahead of time without creating email fatigue. We've found welcome and knowledge packs sent by post to participants go some way to replacing lost personal contact. Other ideas we've heard of - yoga mats for lunchtime exercise sessions; awards/rewards/prizes such as vouchers for home delivery meals or a celebratory drink; break snacks sent out with hard copy agendas.

Derby Homes is one of several ALMOs now livestreaming board meetings and, this year, its AGM direct to YouTube.

Cornwall Housing is among those using Facebook's events feature to advertise and host live Q&A sessions, the most recent on COVID-19 restrictions.

This [content-rich digital advent calendar](#) from **Colchester Borough Homes partner Community 360** is simple and intuitive, website-based, and offers almost 40 click-throughs to online events that range from art gallery tours, quizzes and exercise to community singing and drama.

Platform types

The market has inevitably been flooded with new platforms since the start of the pandemic.

Shared digital content: Camera on, streamed straight to YouTube, Facebook, Vimeo, etc. Less secure, and may not be private. Difficult to control attendee access.

Shared digital content through a secure platform account, open only to invitees: often offers additional features such as polls, chat, Q & A, whiteboard, voting panels. Often free and app based. Good for seminars, training and workshops.

Digital content plus streaming: usually paid-for, content streamed through production software. High quality and can offer pre-recorded content; usually offers greater analytics. Good for awards or presentation events, for larger meetings and AGMs

Complete event package platforms: Paid-for, can be branded and offer sponsor space; multi-session formats, networking spaces; normally includes full registration systems and exhibition space.

Berneslai Homes

Sarah Hopwood, Marketing and Comms Officer



Tenant Voice Panel—Teams, Microsoft 365

Ensuring our Tenant Voice and Scrutiny Panel members could continue to meet was extremely important to us, and to them. We had already supplied members with equipment, training and bespoke email addresses so that they could take an active role in arranging and contributing to meetings. As we went into lockdown they were extremely eager to meet online using the Microsoft Teams software already on their devices. Since then they have been online for meetings and training courses a whopping 37 times since January. They report that as they become more comfortable with this platform, their meetings become more focused and productive.

Customer Panel—Zoom

Our Customer Panels are fun and informal sessions held four times a year, an opportunity for customers to meet our senior management team, board and staff. Customers get a chance to discuss and influence issues such as our Strategic Plan. Since lockdown we've had two online panel events and are planning a third—and the excellent news is that there have been a number of first-time participants, attracted by the online format. We've offered help before the event to anyone who wants to attend but isn't clear how to get online in this way, and we've chosen Zoom because its features that are better suited to a larger meeting, and we have found that our customers can access it easily. At the same time, we're still working to make sure we don't lost contact with customers who can't engage digitally.

Tenants and Residents Associations—Teams, Facebook, Twitter, SMS

Sometimes the simplest solutions are the best, and communication through mobiles and e-mail has increased greatly with our Tenants and Residents Associations. We surveyed the groups' connectivity and equipment and made sure they had the equipment they needed to engage with us online. Some have told us that they'd had no previous experience of online meetings and feel this new skill they've learned is a big positive for future engagement with us. Some groups have taken the digital initiative, sharing information through their own Facebook pages and really helping us to boost our engagement with their communities.

Staff use our Twitter account to communicate with residents as we continue estate walkabouts with social distancing. And SMS, though one of our oldest digital tenant engagement tools, is still one of our most useful ways of asking for tenant opinion on specific issues.

Event delivery

Keeping to advertised timings is the one necessity that live and virtual events share. Drifting session length kills engagement.

Presented sessions should be no longer than 20 mins. Include as much interactivity as possible – Q&As, ice breakers, polls, question and answer boards, whiteboards, voting apps and gamification.

Platforms that offer the possibility of simultaneous workshop groups or break-out rooms will help scheduling of short, pacy sessions with opportunities for attendees to rotate, contribute and participate.

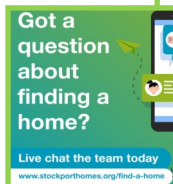
Build in breaks to prevent fatigue. These should be genuine breaks, though they can still have content – short films, quizzes, presentations, image montages.

For off-the-peg interactive pace changers, investigate the burgeoning range of online social and entertainment packages such as horseracing, escape rooms, cook-along masterclasses, musical bingo, and cocktail classes.

Stockport Homes—YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Teams.

Stockport Homes has strong record of **customer engagement through training**, particularly around employability and wellbeing. A reduced training programme continues to teach physical skills and to offer courses for those who can't get online, but SH's YouTube channel now has a number of short video courses such as a four-part series on setting up and running a community group. Customer Training Officer Chris Hughes used the SH YouTube platform in December to share his personal dislike of the holiday season and offer [practical tips for coping with a difficult Christmas](#).

SH is also making regular use of its **website's live chat capability**; a recent session invited callers to join an online Q&A for those trying to find a home – queries are expected to rise as financial fallout from the pandemic hits jobs and savings.



Redundancy Response – Find your next job

Online support session for those who have been made redundant

Like many ALMOs, SH is tailoring help to residents who have lost income or jobs during the pandemic. **Redundancy Response** is an online session offering advice on benefits and career change; Facebook and Twitter promotion; with free registration on Eventbrite and delivery on Teams.

SH has also taken some **governance events** online. Strategic Housing Lead Andrew Kippax and his team meet residents in person each year to discuss proposed rent and service charges; instead, this year Andrew recorded a [YouTube video presentation](#). Residents have been able to comment by email, phone or post.

Blackpool Coastal Housing—Facebook, Zoom

BCH have partnered with county-wide community support hub Our Lancashire to offer a weekly online quiz. It's hosted on Zoom and promoted on the BCH Facebook page, and has been growing in popularity steadily as word has spread.



The entertainment-led format has a light-hearted tone, but opens with a short chat from a guest speaker offering information or expertise on a range of issues from local concerns to general wellbeing and how to access help from a range of agencies. The 20-question quiz is followed by an open chat session to combat isolation.



Awards—Cheltenham Borough Homes, Stockport Homes

Tenant engagement was, from the beginning, a core aim for all ALMOs and many NFA members hold annual awards for their tenants and community groups, inviting nominations from both staff and residents. In normal times, this process and the prize-giving ceremonies themselves create excellent face-to-face networking and engagement opportunities, so finding ways to preserve this regular diary date is important.

2020 was the [12th year of Cheltenham Borough Homes' Tenant and Leaseholder awards](#). The CBH comms team decided to try to capture some of the drama of the usual presentation ceremony with a programme of awards videos, each between five and 10 minutes long, launched on their YouTube and Twitter channels over five days throughout the last week of September.

Chunking the event down across five 'episodes' kept each film to a manageable size; it also made possible a traditional 'countdown' style of revealing third, second and first places. Teams filmed tributes from nominators and set up award presentations on winners' doorsteps, with the bonus of showcasing CBH

homes and surroundings. The film packages were put together professionally and local BBC radio presenter Faye Hatcher recorded the voice-overs. Each one was launched at 6pm, judged a good time of day to reach most residents. The team were able to secure sponsorship from long-term local partners.

[Stockport Homes wrapped their annual awards](#) into one five-minute YouTube presentation, hosted by CEO Helen McHale, using a mix of slides, images and smartphone, laptop and Zoom films. Socially-distanced presentations were arranged at the SH office. The package was put together by staff using simple image and film editing software.

Platform	Features and benefits	Budget	Ease of use
Facebook Live	+ live recording and streaming + unlimited attendees	As part of Face-book account	Basic - Very easy.
Zoom Meetings  Also available: Zoom Webinars Zoom Rooms	+ four plans to choose from + video, audio communication + free and subscription plans, both feature-heavy + branding, cloud storage, transcripts and more on larger plans + compatible with most operating systems + good mobile app + hosts 100 – 300 attendees dependent on plan + add-ons available with licensed plans + customer service support available + breakout room options	From free to £240 Subscription cost for corporate organisation Higher costs for Zoom Webinars and Zoom Rooms	Intuitive. Easy for host and attendees.
Google Meet 	+ HD video and standard interactivity features + up to 250 attendees + one-click presenting functionality + integrates with other Google apps including Google drive + secure encryption and privacy features	Free with a Google email account	User friendly and easy to host. Good for first-time users
Cisco WebEx Meetings 	+ breakout rooms options + Plans from basic meetings to events of 100,000 attendees + good mobile app + can be integrated into calendars and Microsoft apps + has range of interactive tools + recording in MP4 with range of storage options + chat and call-in customer support	From free to £240 Higher costs for WebEx Training and WebEx Events	Intuitive and similar to Zoom. Easy to host.
GoToMeeting  Also available GotoWebinars GotoTraining GotoRooms	+ personal meeting room + host up to 250 attendees + standard interactive tools + integrates easily into Microsoft 365 + unlimited recording + transcriptions	Monthly subscription charge of £9.50 upwards	User-friendly and easy to host.
Teams And Teams Live Events 	+ replaces Skype for business + integrates easily into other 365 apps including Outlook + multi interactive tools, chat, groups & channels, breakout rooms + Teams – live events available in administration area + Streaming platform, useful for broadcasting + scheduling and producing + closed captioning	A Microsoft 365 app	Intuitive. Easy for host and attendees. Minimal training for Live Events.
Whova 	+ Session streaming, video replay and virtual booths + attendee engagement & networking to mimic virtual conference + online registration + customer support + protected access to sessions registered participants	Cost dependent on event size and services.	Requires some training and knowledge
Airmeet 	+ free version hosts up to 100 attendees + Parallel sessions/multi track sessions + virtual ballroom/networking in lounge with 'tables' + live streaming via Youtube and Facebook + Q&A and Upvotes + robust security and privacy, and live support + inbuilt registration with landing page + no limit on number of events per month	From free to monthly subscription starting at approx. £75	Intuitive and easy to master
Hopin 	+ host events of any type or size + sell event tickets (7% commission to Hopin) + full registration system and data analysis + multi use – webinars, seminars, hybrid, podcasts, live, stage etc. + integrates with streaming software + public and private events	Monthly subscription up to 100 participants. Over 100 participants – small cost per registration	Similar to other platforms but needs some training and knowledge