

National Scrutiny Group Report

Customer Experience Committee



REPORT	
Meeting Date:	23 October 2019
Report Title:	How well does Accent communicate fire safety to its residents?
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For Decision <input type="checkbox"/> Debate <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Information <input type="checkbox"/>	
Summary:	The National Scrutiny Group has scrutinised the way in which Accent communicates fire safety to its residents, to ensure that all residents clearly know what steps to be taken in the event of a fire.
Appendices Attached:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Fire Safety Survey Results 2. Fire Safety Research Stakeholder Interviews 3. Fire Safety Survey Respondent Comments

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1. Background

In the wake of the Grenfell disaster and inquiry, the National Scrutiny Group decided to carry out an investigation into how well Accent communicated with its residents with regards to fire safety, and whether or not it is clear to all residents what steps to take in the event of a fire.

2. Methodology & Evidence Gathering

In order to get a strong overview of this topic a broad understanding was required around customer experiences and views. The NSG compared this to Accent's policies, overall aims and objectives and decision-making practices.

The group met with key staff members within Accent:

- **Maddie Poutney**, Insurance & Risk Manager
- **Jill Barlow**, Health & Safety Manager
- **Heather Jacklin**, Media & Communications Specialist
- **Henna Mahmood**, Lettings Administrator
- **Shafia Aziz**, Housing Advisor

The NSG acknowledges that following a restructure, with the exception of Media & Communications Specialist, these posts no longer exist – which is why other service area managers have responded to this report instead.

To gather customer experiences the group carried out an email survey of residents living in bedsits, flats and maisonettes with communal entrance areas.

A representative sample of 2,337 residents were invited to take part in this survey out of a possible 7,125 eligible residents. 342 responses were received. The demography of the respondents roughly reflects the demography of Accent's wider resident population, in terms of region, age band, tenure type and household composition.

Members of the National Scrutiny Group also visited some schemes across the country to view the fire safety notices displayed in schemes and understand how effective these were at relaying the necessary information.

The NSG also analysed a wide selection of fire safety advice available on other housing association websites to gather examples of best practice and innovative ways of engaging with residents about fire safety.

3. Findings

Staff Interviews

- i) The interview with **Maddie Poutney**, Insurance & Risk Manager revealed that:
- It has been recognised that more needs to be done to consult with residents about fire safety to ensure that they understand their responsibilities, and Accent's responsibilities to them.
 - Information about fire safety is provided to new residents at sign-up, but there is nothing in place to ensure that residents have remembered fire safety advice and evacuation procedures further into their tenancies.
 - Fire safety guidance in tenancy agreements is vague.
 - Careful consideration needs to be given as to how Accent can make vulnerable residents aware of their responsibilities. Hoarders and those with other mental health conditions could pose a particular risk.
 - The Grenfell Tower incident may have confused residents about whether their best chance of survival in a fire incident is to 'Stay put' or 'Get out'.
 - Front-line staff are responsible for liaising with residents about breaches in their tenancy agreements, which may include failure to adhere to fire safety guidance. Such opportunities could be used to remind residents about which evacuation policy applies to their building.
 - Residents need assurance following fire incidents, which may involve visits to schemes and face-to-face contact.
 - Annual 'customer care checks' are aimed at residents who have not had any engagement with Accent in the last 12 months, and could be used as a means of reminding residents of their fire safety responsibilities
- ii) The interview with **Jill Barlow**, Health & Safety Manager revealed that:
- The Health & Safety Team are responsible for keeping fire safety policies and procedures up to date. This involves consultation with regional staff, managers and directors.
 - Accent would be open to working with local fire services in the interest of promoting fire safety.
 - Fire risk assessments are Accent's responsibility.
 - There are two separate policies for evacuation. Residents are advised either to 'Stay put' or 'Get out'. The advice given depends on the tenure type, and the type and layout of the building.
 - Residents who happen to be in a common area when a fire breaks out are advised to 'Get out'. Advice to this effect should be displayed in common areas on all schemes.
 - Accent does not necessarily explain to residents why the 'Stay put' or 'Get out' policy is most appropriate for their scheme.
 - It can be more difficult to engage with leaseholders about fire safety issues.
 - Fire safety advice is available online, but there are only two variants of the advice given; General Needs and Independent Living. It is not tailored for individual schemes.
 - Fire safety advice may be harder to access for residents who are digitally excluded.

- Accent is introducing a new process; ‘Person-centred fire risk assessments’ which involves working with vulnerable residents on an individual basis to identify fire safety risks such as smoking or hoarding, and possible control measures. This could involve devising a personal evacuation plan.
- Residents may develop vulnerabilities later in their tenancies, which might impact their ability to understand and adhere to fire safety guidelines. Person-centred fire risk assessments will help to mitigate this problem for residents in Independent Living, but it may be more difficult to engage with residents in General Needs accommodation.

iii) Interview with **Heather Jacklin**, Media & Communications Specialist revealed that:

- Fire safety leaflets are only available online.
- There is no provision to print leaflets in other languages, however if residents are able to access the leaflet online, they can use Google to translate it into another language.
- Accent aims to link its communications to other national campaigns such as ‘Gas Safety Week’.
- Accent needs to target residents with whom it typically struggles to engage, to remind them of their fire safety responsibilities and Accent’s responsibilities to them.
- The tour bus, used to promote Accent’s services in summer 2018 could be used to promote fire safety to residents locally.
- Wider publicity of fire safety news may encourage residents to take the issue more seriously.

iv) Interview with **Henna Mahmood**, Lettings Administrator & **Shafia Aziz**, Housing Advisor revealed that:

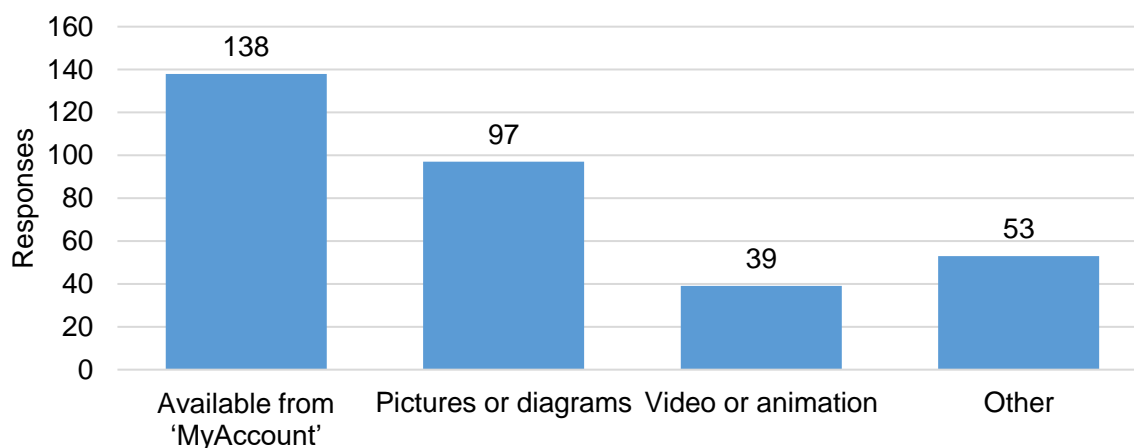
- Customer Partners (formerly known as Housing Officers) carry out home visits to applicants and viewings with prospective residents. Customer Partners are responsible for pointing out fire escapes and fire safety equipment at viewings and for discussing evacuation procedures with new residents.
- New residents are required to sign to confirm they have read and understood their fire safety responsibilities at sign-up, but as they are supplied with so much information there is a risk that they may not properly absorb this advice.
- Residents could be reminded of their fire safety responsibilities shortly after commencing their tenancies, by means of the Starter Tenancy process.
- Residents are supplied with a hard-copy fire safety leaflet relevant to their tenure type when they move in to their property, however this could change with ‘Let’s Move’ (online application process).
- Fire safety advice could be pictorial; in the same way as emergency advice is provided on aircraft pictorially, to take into consideration the fact that applicants and new residents speak a range of different languages.
- Online translation services help speakers of other languages to access fire safety advice provided through ‘Let’s Move’.
- Fire safety advice which is specific to particular schemes, or to residents with particular needs could be provided through ‘MyAccount’.

Fire Safety Survey

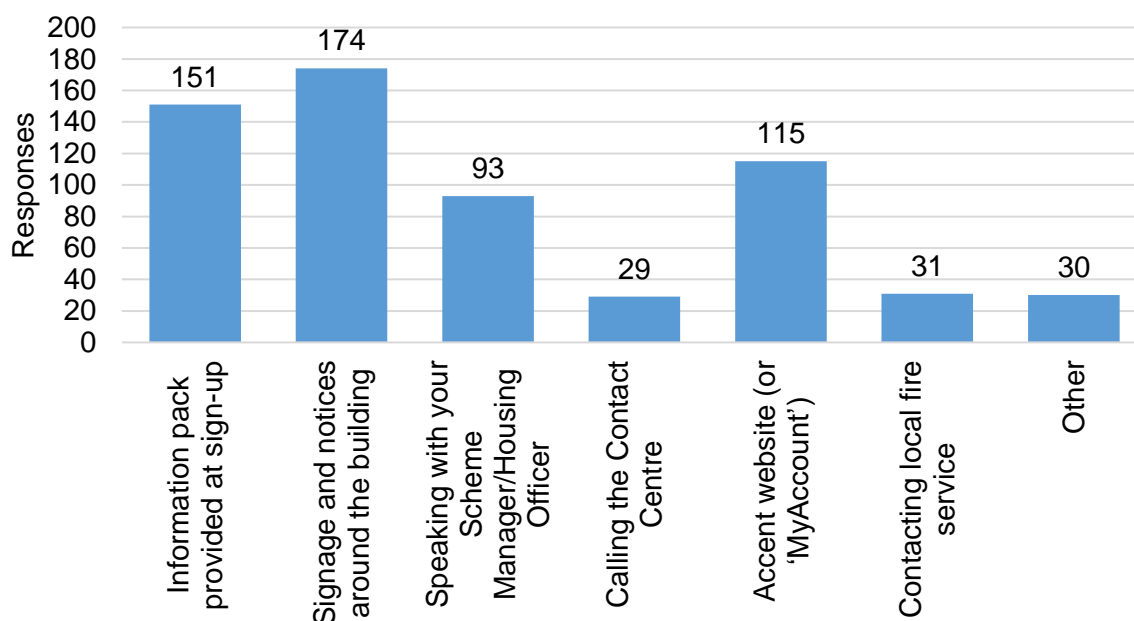
This survey was aimed at a cross-section of residents who live in flats with communal areas. The survey yielded 342/2337 (14.6%) responses with a margin of error of $\pm 5.2\%$.

	Yes	Yes (%)	No	No (%)
Did we provide you with a fire safety leaflet?	95	39.3	147	60.7
Did you have time to read and absorb the information in the leaflet?	86	38.1	140	61.9
Did we explain what you should do in the event of a fire?	114	42.4	155	57.6

Would you have preferred the fire safety information in a different format?



How would you expect to find out which policy applies to your building?



Do you have any suggestions as to how Accent could make its fire safety communications clearer or more engaging?

Be personal. Generic advice is ignored. If it's person specific you will probably be more effective in getting people to read the information.

By explaining it in detail and making sure the recipient understands the procedure and also give time for the recipient to voice concerns and ask any relevant questions.

By explaining to residents by letters or meetings why you do things. People might not realise the decisions you make.

Engage with the residents on the sites more to advise of amendments to the legislation and rules.

Face-to-face so every body understands their own and other responsibilities.

It's your responsibility to engage us and remind us how to deal in case of fire.

I don't recall having any fire safety information at all. Whether this is because I am a homeowner and not a renter I'm not sure, but would imagine this being the case.

If it was on MyAccount, on web, I would have access to all this information at all times. Letters get lost in the post so I would prefer this information in MyAccount.

Site Visits

A number of schemes were visited to see what notices and signs were in place regarding fire safety, and some common themes were noted:

- Contradictory or ambiguous advice on fire safety notices; advice open to interpretation.
- Cluttered notice boards; information not displayed in a logical order.
- Not immediately apparent where on boards to find fire safety information.
- Fire safety notices worn and damaged.
- Limited use of colour; focal point lacking.
- Mixture of text sizes. The most important notices are not necessarily in larger print. Larger font may be favoured by some residents, for example older people and those with visual impairments.
- Bradford & Northern branding still used, indicating that fire safety notices are not up to date.



Figure 1: Cluttered noticeboard with notices behind reflective glass at The Martindales, Chorley



Figure 2: Worn and damaged paper notice replaced with a coloured laminated notice at The Martindales, Chorley

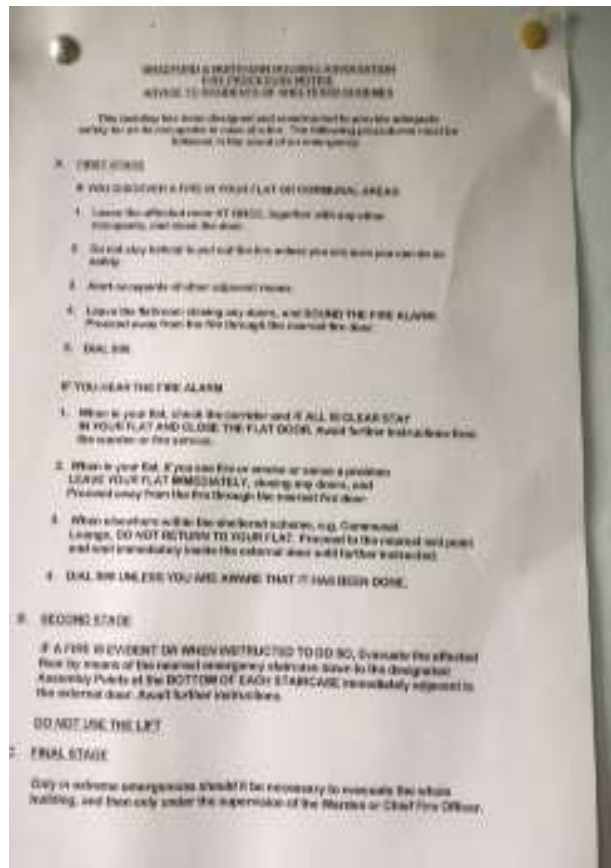


Figure 3: Monochrome paper notice in fine print with 'Bradford & Northern' branding at Astura Court, Leeds (a scheme which is home to a number of vulnerable residents).

4. Conclusions

- Residents are confused about the recommended course of action in the event of a fire. Ambiguous communication from Accent may be contributing to confusion.
- Vulnerable residents, and those whom Accent typically struggles to engage with (working age residents and those with families) could be more at risk of failing to understand and act upon fire safety advice.
- Accent needs to take advantage of opportunities to engage with new residents about fire safety, and address the confusion long-serving residents have expressed.
- There is a clear indication that residents would like bespoke, personalised fire safety advice, and for it to be available online.

5. Recommendations

	Recommendations	Strategic Priority	Service Area Manager	Response	Measures for success
1	Issue fire safety reminders to all residents (including long-serving residents) to advise them of recommended actions in the event of a fire.	Affordable & Secure Homes	Mark Sanderson, Fire & Safety Manager	Using current media, monthly information will be published to all residents this will be backed up with 6 monthly emails/letters to residents on fire safety within the home. The fire and safety team are working on information from local fire services across all regions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Records of communications sent. Read receipts from emails. Number of posts and engagements on social media. Records of resident involvement events (for example; coffee mornings on Independent Living schemes).
2	Printed publications and information available on the website should be pictorial or diagrammatic as far as possible, so that it may be easily interpreted by residents who have sight problems, difficulty reading, or who are speakers of other languages.	Service Choice & Innovation	Mark Sanderson, Fire & Safety Manager	The Fire & Safety team will be using media to ensure all group have the benefit of fire safety information. This will be developed with the Brand & Communications team.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> New signage displayed in schemes. Copies sent to NSG members for reference.
3	Signage displayed around communal areas must be readable, clear, concise, consistent, sensibly situated and up-to-date.	Affordable & Secure Homes	Mark Sanderson, Fire & Safety Manager	The Fire & Safety team are replacing signage that is not fit for purpose on any inspection of buildings. This will prove to be ongoing.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> New signage displayed in schemes. Copies sent to NSG members for reference. Site visits to check that signage is accurate and up to date.
4	Fire notices must be site specific, clearly state which evacuation policy applies and must not be generic or open to interpretation.	Affordable & Secure Homes	Mark Sanderson, Fire & Safety Manager	The fire action notices will work with other specific site information.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Site specific signage displayed in schemes. Site visits to check that signage is accurate and up to date. Survey to ascertain whether residents know which evacuation policy applies to their building.

	Recommendations	Strategic Priority	Service Area Manager	Response	Measures for success
5	Fire safety should be discussed with new residents as part of the starter tenancy process, to ensure that residents understand their fire safety responsibilities and how they would respond in the event of a fire.	Affordable & Secure Homes	Mark Sanderson, Fire & Safety Manager	Information will be presented to all regions on customer fire safety. This can be presented at time of sign-up with other sign-up information. This will be specific for that family within that building and region.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Survey to ascertain whether residents are aware of their fire safety responsibilities and know which evacuation policy applies to their building.
6	Be proactive in identifying vulnerabilities which may impact on fire safety, and offer appropriate support. If other agencies are better able to assist, point vulnerable residents in the direction of that support.	Affordable & Secure Homes	Mark Sanderson, Fire & Safety Manager	Regional Fire & Safety Assessors are available to assist customers with specific needs. This will be made transparent to other regional teams and the Aids & Adaptions team.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Customer vulnerabilities are up to date on Accent's housing management system. Fire safety publications have guidance on other agencies that can offer support.
7	Address the confusion about fire safety by engaging with residents through as many channels as possible (which may include new channels such as MyAccount and road shows). Focus on engaging with working age residents and those with families.	Service Choice & Innovation	Mark Sanderson, Fire & Safety Manager	The Fire & Safety team will be using media to ensure all group have the benefit of fire safety information. This will be developed with the Brand & Communications team. Further to this, meetings will be held within specific buildings focusing on the most vulnerable.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Residents are reminded about fire safety through whichever method is most appropriate to their circumstances. Records of communications sent. Read receipts from emails. Number of posts and engagements on social media. Records of resident involvement events (for example; coffee mornings on Independent Living schemes). Survey to ascertain whether residents are aware of their fire safety responsibilities and know which evacuation policy applies to their building.

	Recommendations	Strategic Priority	Service Area Manager	Response	Measures for success
8	Homeowners should be provided with fire safety information at key stages of the purchase process and should be included in any reminders or updates about fire safety.	Affordable & Secure Homes	Mark Sanderson, Fire & Safety Manager	The Fire & Safety Team will work with the Homeownership Team to ensure all available information is presented to any prospective buyer.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Homeownership Welcome Pack contains all relevant health and safety information. • Survey to ascertain whether residents (homeowners in particular) are aware of their fire safety responsibilities know which evacuation policy applies to their building.