Report to:	Services Scrutiny Panel	Date:	22. 10. 2015
Title:	Local Communications (to blocks) Project	Item:	
Report by:	Annie Lathaen, Keith Usher, Dorothy Delahunt, David Wickersham	Status:	For decision

1   Executive Summary

1.1   The scope for this review was to consider how Octavia communicates with residents as a group living in blocks, what Octavia communicated about, and the effectiveness of that communication.

1.2   The Services Scrutiny Panel (SSP) sub group has made 10 recommendations as a result of the project. These can be found in section 6 below. These recommendations were as a result of feedback from residents, key staff involved, a meeting with caretakers, a check on the functionality of the resident 'My Account login', and feedback from residents at a scheme undergoing lift works.

1.3   The key findings include:

- The majority of local communication is through letters with an under-utilisation of email and text indicating a need to encourage greater use of these newer methods of communication with less reliance on letters (except legal communication and where letter is requested by residents);
- Residents' main concerns were about responsiveness and being kept informed, in particular around the key services of repairs and ASB;
- Staff generally felt local communication was effective but a number raised issues around the quality of contact data and issues with joint working between teams;
- Caretakers felt they needed to be kept more informed on a range of issues including repairs, planned works and lettings in order to communicate effectively with residents on their schemes;
- The above internal communication issues within Octavia are conflating issues with regards to local communication with residents;
- The 'My Account login' check found several errors on rent and repairs information and difficulties registering to login if you were a longer standing resident without a login provided at sign up;
- The experience at Crossways, a block where lift works were taking place. Asset management tried to engage with all residents but a number of affected residents did not engage which posed the question 'why not'? We then surveyed these residents which seemed to suggest that a small minority of people will not actively engage despite being affected by a situation. Octavia need to acknowledge this and put the resources in place to manage this situation when it arises;
- Octavia to consider the merits of developing Key Messages for staff regarding communication.

2 Background

2.1 'Communication' has featured strongly in recent resident feedback including: the last STAR survey, dot democracy at Yourspace, complaints, and recent SSP projects on noise nuisance and service charges. Octavia has a strong culture of emphasising the importance of personal and individual contact. However, it is unclear if there is a similar focus on contact with residents as a group, living in blocks, concerning local issues when there are on-going common concerns, for example, if a service is changed or in regards to communal repairs.

3 Aims

3.1 The aims of the scrutiny project were:

- To establish whether Octavia has an agreed approach on 'local' communication with residents living in blocks about common issues;
- To establish what Octavia communicates about with residents in blocks, and what are the gaps in relation to local communication;
- To establish how Octavia communicates with residents in blocks regarding issues of concern or about a change in the service;
- To carry out reality tests to gain insight into residents' experience and their expectations of local communication;
- To investigate how we can better communicate with residents who do not have access to the internet.
- To review whether modern communication methods such as email and text are being used effectively;
- To investigate the potential benefits from improved digital/internet channels for local communication (for example the 'My Account login' and electronic notice boards);

4 Method

4.1 A sub group of the SSP were charged with carrying out the scrutiny. The sub group members were: Annie Lathaen, Dorothy Delahunt, Keith Usher, and David Wickersham.

4.2 There were 5 strands to the scrutiny work carried out:

- An electronic survey and a door knocking survey conducted by Resident Inspectors to obtain resident feedback;
- A discussion group and survey with key staff;
- A discussion group with Caretakers;
- Feedback from resident members of the SSP on their experience of the 'My Account login';
- Feedback from residents on communication regarding lift replacement works.

5 Scrutiny Checks

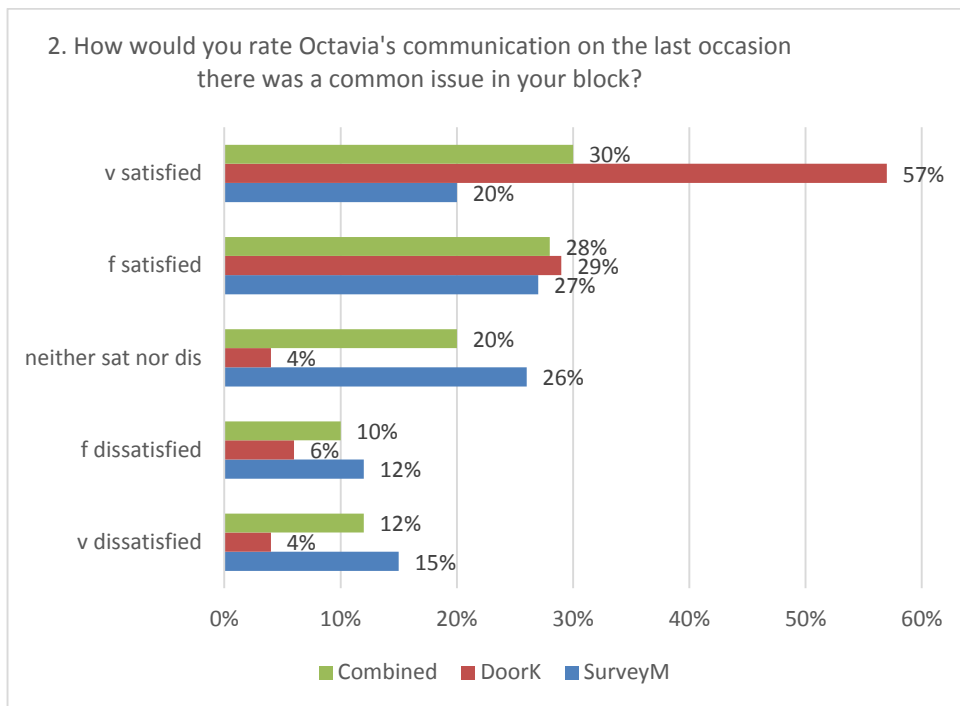## 5.1 Resident survey – electronic and in person

5.1.1 724 residents were emailed surveys via SurveyMonkey. 139 (19% of the sample) responded. To try and balance out possible bias caused by the electronic method Resident Inspectors visited 4 schemes (194 units) and completed 50 surveys (26%) with residents who had no email recorded on Octavia's systems.

5.1.2 Residents said they communicated with Octavia most about communal repairs (38%), cleaning of communal areas (23%), ASB (18%), and planned works (18%).
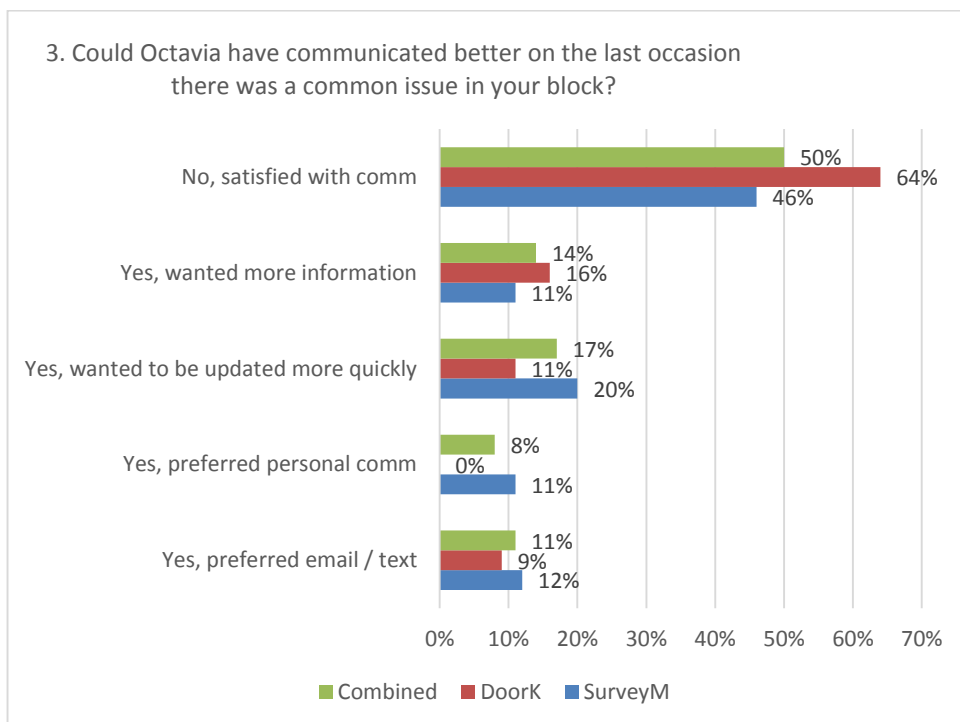
5.1.3 By far the most common method of contact by Octavia with residents was by letter (62%), dropping significantly to email (16%) and telephone (11%). Text accounted for a very small portion of the contact (2%). The patterns of contact methods are similar for both those completing the survey electronically and at door knocking. This is a surprise as the former might have been expected to receive more electronic contact because we have their electronic contact details.
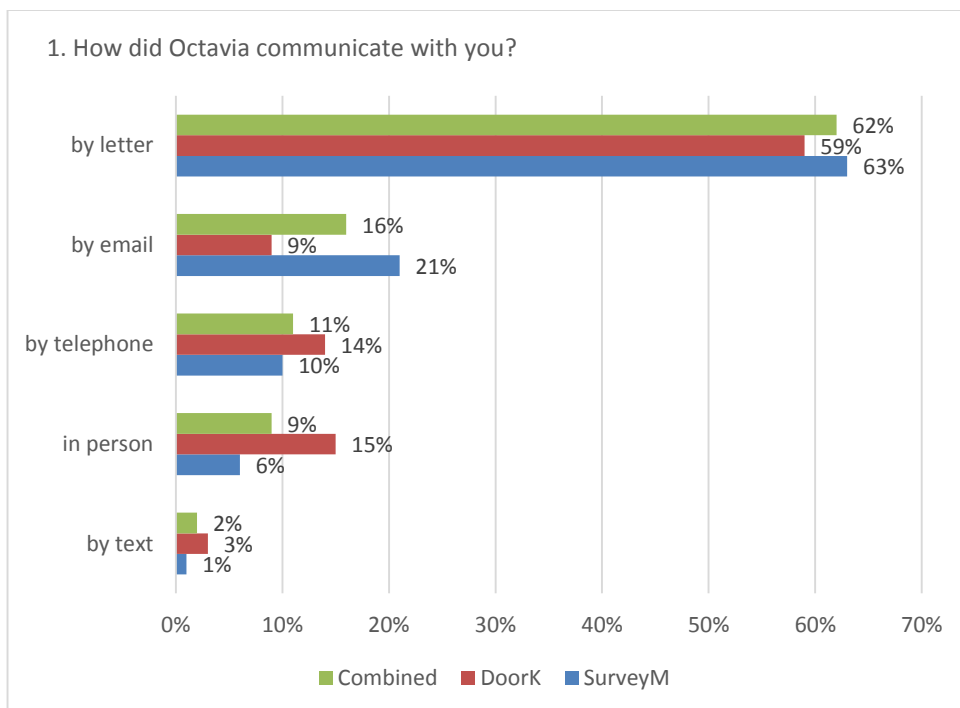
5.1.4 Overall 58% of residents said they were satisfied with Octavia's last local communication with them as a group. There was a marked difference in the results from the 2 groups with 47% of those surveyed electronically satisfied contrasting with 86% of those surveyed in person saying they were satisfied. To some extent this may reflect the bias common in survey work with in person surveying usually attracting the most positive results of all methods.

2. How would you rate Octavia's communication on the last occasion there was a common issue in your block?

Rating	Combined	DoorK	SurveyM
v satisfied	30%	57%	20%
f satisfied	28%	29%	27%
neither sat nor dis	20%	4%	26%
f dissatisfied	10%	6%	12%
v dissatisfied	12%	4%	15%

Combined ▪ DoorK ▪ SurveyM

5.1.5 In terms of how Octavia could have communicated better the most common responses were wanting to be updated more quickly (17%), and wanting more information (14%).

3. Could Octavia have communicated better on the last occasion there was a common issue in your block?

Response	Combined	DoorK	SurveyM
No, satisfied with comm	50%	64%	46%
Yes, wanted more information	14%	16%	11%
Yes, wanted to be updated more quickly	17%	11%	20%
Yes, preferred personal comm	8%	0%	11%
Yes, preferred email / text	11%	9%	12%

Combined ▪ DoorK ▪ SurveyM

5.1.6 35% of residents said they were not aware of what their Caretakers responsibilities were. This is surprising given the majority of Octavia's Caretakers are residential and will have a great deal of day to day contact with residents:

4. If you have a caretaker are you aware of their responsibilities?
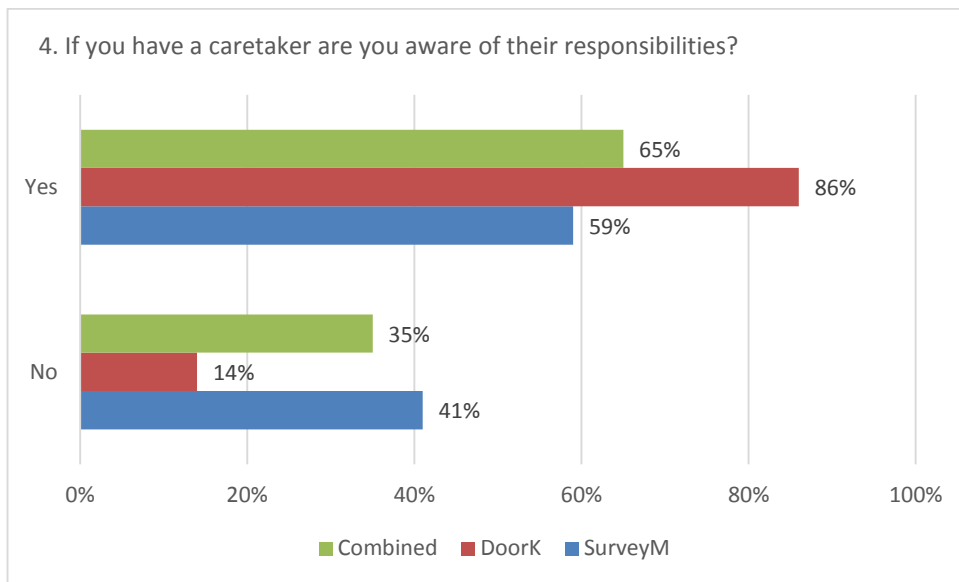
5.1.7   Residents who wanted more communication were most interested in receiving communication about ASB and neighbour nuisance, security issues and updates regarding planned works. It should be noted that this was a free text question and only a minority of residents answered the question.

5. Tell us what you would like us to communicate more about and the best way for us to communicate with you about this?			
Issues:	Combined	DoorK	SurveyM
ASB and neighbour nuisance	9	2	7
security issues, e.g. lighting	8	3	5
update on communal repairs	6	3	3
explain services charges	3	1	2
more updates generally	3	1	2
monitoring of caretaking	2	0	2
items left in communal areas	2	0	2
planned works	2	0	2

5.1.8   When asked what one thing Octavia could do to improve local communication, the highest responses were: prompt responses, text and email (these suggestions came mostly from the group completing the electronic survey), and scheme meetings.
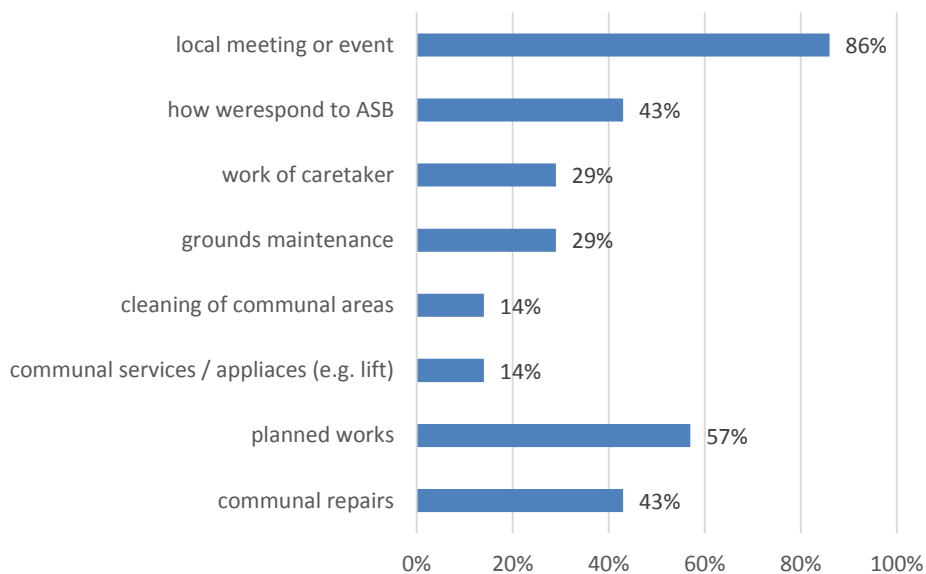
6. What one thing can Octavia do to improve its communication to you and your neighbours about common issues that affect all residents in your block?			
Issues:	Combined	DoorK	SurveyM
prompt responses	13	1	12
text and email updates	13	2	11
scheme meetings	9	3	6
personal contact, not impersonal letters	7	2	5
updates on communal repairs	6	0	6
better use of notice board	5	1	4
updates on who to contact and contact details	4	0	4
caretakers report / update on communal repairs	4	1	3

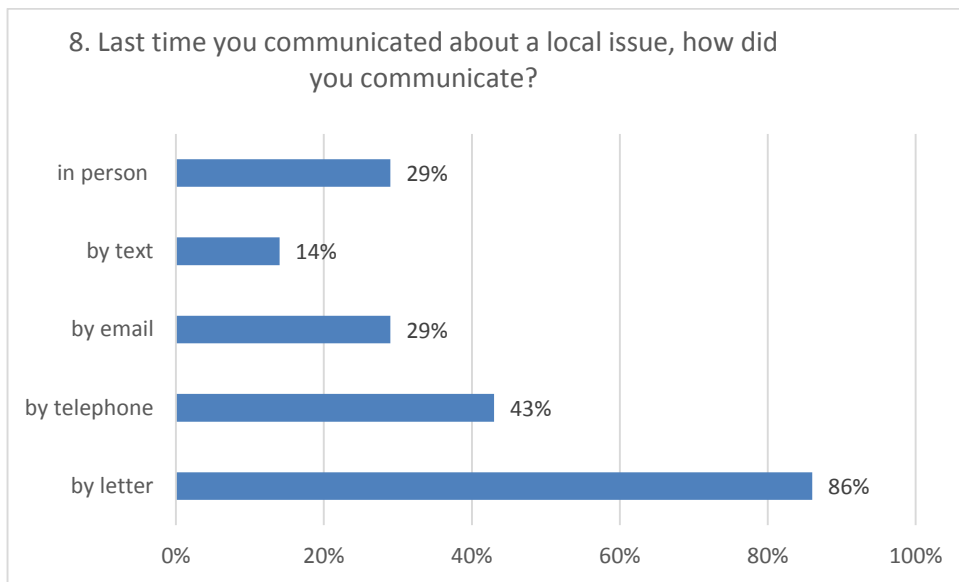|			
Information about service charges	3	2	1
by letter	3	1	2
one lead staff member	2	0	2
more inspection of block	2	0	2
information about sub letting	2	0	2

5.2 Staff survey

5.2.1 Prior to conducting the staff survey the sub group met with a number of key staff involved in local communication (Communications, Resident Involvement, Neighbourhoods, Alternative Tenures, Asset Management and Estate Services) in order to gauge whether there was an overall strategy in place regarding local communication. It was quickly evident that no such strategy was in place. Checks with other L9 Associations found those peer Associations similarly did not have such a communications strategy in place. There were different views within the SSP sub group as to whether such a strategy would be beneficial or impractical given the myriad of different reasons for local communication and diversity of schemes.

5.2.2 There is some synergy between what residents said they contacted Octavia about in terms of local issues and what the staff said with planned works (57%), ASB (43%) and communal repairs (43%) amongst the most common issues. The top issue from staff was about local meetings and events (86%).
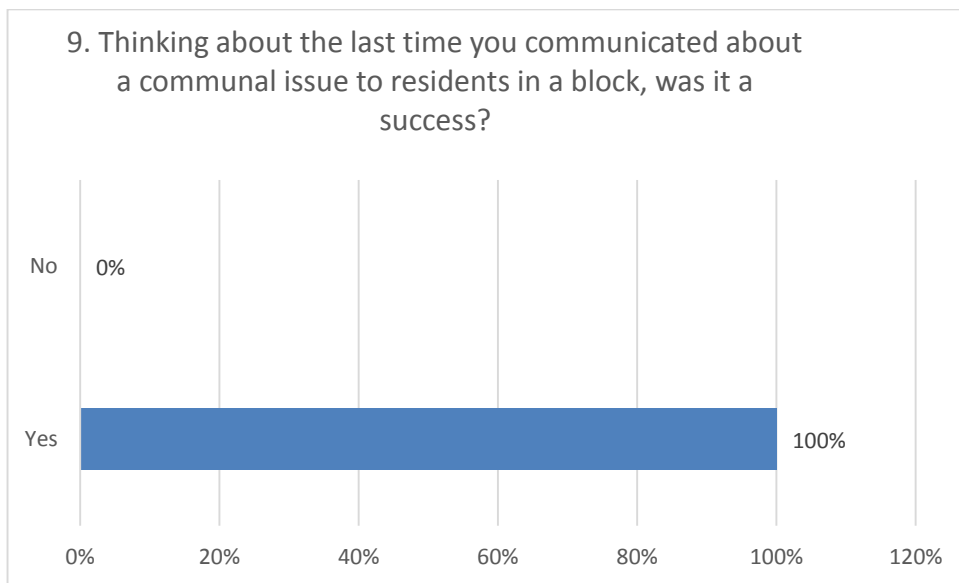
7. What communal issues do you communicate about to residents in blocks of flats?

Category	Percentage
local meeting or event	86%
how werespond to ASB	43%
work of caretaker	29%
grounds maintenance	29%
cleaning of communal areas	14%
communal services / appliaces (e.g. lift)	14%
planned works	57%
communal repairs	43%

5.2.3 Staff feedback on the methods of communication also reflects what residents said with 86% of communications by letter, dropping to 43% by telephone with text the least common option (14%).

8. Last time you communicated about a local issue, how did you communicate?

in person	29%
by text	14%
by email	29%
by telephone	43%
by letter	86%

(0% — 20% — 40% — 60% — 80% — 100%)

5.2.4   On the success of the communication, staff responses differed significantly from residents with all staff surveyed rating their last communication as a success.

9. Thinking about the last time you communicated about a communal issue to residents in a block, was it a success?

No	0%
Yes	100%

(0% — 20% — 40% — 60% — 80% — 100% — 120%)

The 100% rating is somewhat contradicted by the staff themselves when asked about the improvements that could be made. Their comments were:

- 'Lack of joint working, poor co-ordination.'
- 'Conflicting information and clarity being given to customers.'
- 'Sometimes the amount of time it takes to mail merge to a larger block or estate – can be quite time consuming.'
- 'Easy system for extracting contact details. Missing data.'
- 'Lack of updates. Not getting back to residents. Assuming a resident's response. Not being prepared during meetings. Failure to consult with residents when major works are carried out.'
- 'Assuming something has been done, and not listening. The face to face approach is key to good comms and not believing an email will cover the matter.'

- 'Poor data, too many messages at once, overload of information and inconsistency of style (we have a large number of standard letter templates and we try to funnel all 'mass' message promotions or communications through the Communications team but some slip through and if they are not written effectively they can be confusing or create a poor impression.'

5.3 Discussion group with caretakers

5.3.1 The sub group met with 6 residential Caretakers to obtain feedback from them about their role in local communication, the related common issues, and the challenges with regard to local communication from their perspective.

5.3.2 The key issues raised by caretakers were:

5.3.3 **Repairs –**
- There needs to be a system in place to ensure that communal repairs once reported are logged, so that if the repair is reported again by another resident they will be informed that the job has already been reported and logged and a second order not raised.
- Caretakers to be informed of what communal works are being carried out on estates, time frame and who the contractor is with contact details.
- Appointments should be made in liaison with the caretaker to ensure access.
- Contractors sometimes don't have the correct contact details and this can lead to delays.
- Contractors should keep tenants informed about repairs on-going for a long time and keep caretakers informed if it is a communal repair.

5.3.4 **Estates -**
- Caretakers need to be informed about changes and information regarding communal areas on estates.

5.3.5 **Voids –**
- Caretakers should be informed about work on voids; the extent of the work, contractors' details, who is moving in and when.

5.3.6 **Cyclical works –**
- It would be better to liaise at the outset of planning work in case something needs to be added into the contract which relates to caretaking.

5.3.7 **Communication -**
- Caretakers should be informed of what contracts are in place and the timescale of regular visits. Caretakers can allow access and sign off work sheets.
- The best way of communicating information is to put a note under the residents' doors.
- There should more clarity for staff and residents as to who is responsible for informing residents of what is happening and residents need to be clear who they should contact with regard to different issues.
- More promotion to staff and residents about the translation and interpretation services Octavia uses and what to do to access those services.

5.4 'My Account login'

5.4.1 A resident member of the SSP provided feedback on their experience of the 'My Account login' on the Octavia website. Residents using this function need to have login details which are provided to residents at sign up in recent years. Longer standing residents have to register for their login. Logging in takes the resident to a personal and secure page with information on rent and repairs. The information viewed is not live but is updated on a daily basis.

5.4.2 The resident SSP member had not used the function before and was a longstanding tenant. He reported a number of issues with the registration process: he felt the tab to click on for login was not prominent enough, once he came to near the end of the registration process and clicked to email for a login that email bounced back, and he finally completed the registration and received the login after involving the intervention of 3 members of staff.

5.4.3 A number of errors appeared on his 'My Account' page - one of the places where the rent charged was shown was out of date and showed his rent prior to his last rent increase, a completed repair was shown as still open, and another open repair was shown that he had not reported.

5.4.4 The issues noted in 5.4.2 and 5.4.3 were reported to Communications and have been resolved.

5.4.5 The 'My Account login' currently is not used to communicate about local issues common to all residents living in a block. Both residents on the sub group felt this added functionality should be explored and they themselves would value such information.

5.4.6 Improvements to the 'My Account login' are planned as part of the Smarter Working Project.

5.5 Crossways lift works and communication

5.5.1 Crossways is a general needs only scheme with 24 flats over 4 floors. On 13 January 2015 Octavia wrote to all residents in the block advising them the lift will be out of use for several weeks in March / April whilst necessary works are carried out. A short questionnaire was enclosed so that Octavia could provide support to those who would experience practical problems without the lift in use. 16 residents responded of whom 11 lived on the floors impacted. 5 residents living on floors impacted did not respond and were subsequently visited in person, 2 of these residents had mobility problems and another 2 of these households were families with young children. Octavia decided to install a stairlift to the affected floors given the extent of the issues. In addition, the situation provided an opportunity to pilot an electronic notice board to gauge if this new way of communicating would be effective.

5.5.2 The sub group asked Resident Inspectors to survey in person residents at Crossways in late April to try to understand the reasons of low engagement when they were first contacted about the lift works, and to gain feedback on the electronic notice board. The

Resident Inspectors surveyed 8 households (including 4 out of the 5 who were living on the floors impacted and had not responded initially). The main findings were:

- 2 of the households who were impacted and did not respond said they 'meant to but forgot' and 'had busy lives' respectively. The other 2 households declined to answer the question.
- There was mixed feedback on the electronic board: 4 residents said they found it useful; 2 residents said the information stayed the same on the board so they had stopped looking at it; 3 residents said they had not noticed the new board with 2 saying that the board was placed too high and therefore not visible enough.

6 Findings and recommendations

6.1 The above findings cuts across a number of services and a range of issues. Given this, Octavia may wish to consider developing Key Messages for staff regarding communication. Key Messages may help to ensure more consistent working, direct staff to contact residents with regards to their contact method preferences, and encourage a greater use of modern and efficient communication methods. However, it is possible that what is communicated about is too complex and disjointed to fall into one overly prescriptive approach. The sub group's specific findings and recommendations are:

	Findings	Recommendations
1	A number of key staff felt that residents were not clear about the responsibilities of different staff and who to contact on what issues.	Review information provided to residents about key front line staff and their responsibilities including the website, the new residents' handbook, on notice boards, and also look to increase awareness at local events.
2	A significant number of residents surveyed said they were unclear about the role of their Caretaker.	As above in relation to key frontline staff. In particular include Caretakers in attending local events in the coming year and review how Caretakers are introduced to new residents.
3	A number of key staff said that more accurate and up to date contact details data would help to improve local communication.	Develop and implement a system whereby Octavia's CRM system automatically alerts the staff member recording a contact to ask the resident if their contact details have changed. This check should be made at regular and defined intervals with the system alerting a staff member to make the check if the defined interval is exceeded.

Asset Management to confirm that the previously identified issues of information being over-written when transferred between Octavia and Mears' systems have been resolved. |
| 4 | The main concerns expressed by residents were those common to many feedback exercises, namely that they want communication to be responsive and to be kept updated especially on key services such as repairs, planned works and ASB. | Octavia to make better use of CRM reporting to monitor responsiveness. This should take place at different levels, by managers in regards to their teams and by senior managers in regards to departmental and organisational performance.
CRM usage, and responsiveness to form some of the objectives set for relevant frontline staff. |

5	Feedback from staff and residents show that the vast majority of communication is by post, and there is an under-utilisation of email and text.	Staff communicating on local issues to check on the communication preference recorded on Octavia's system and follow those preferences where possible. Carry out an analysis of the communication preference information recorded on the CRM system to check on the extent of any gaps and on the data quality, and develop and implement related improvement plans where needed. This should include the system's ability to produce letters only for those that request them. If we follow residents preferences for email and text considerable savings could be made on postage.
6	A number of residents said that they wanted more local events.	Analyse the surveys to identify whether residents from particular schemes requested this. If yes, plan a local event at the identified schemes.
7	Caretakers really are the 'eyes and ears' on the ground. They fed back that they could be much better informed about a range of issues which will enable them to more effectively communicate with residents and keep them up to date.	Key Asset and Housing team managers to attend a Caretakers team meeting to discuss in more detail the improvements that could to be made to working practices and how they are implemented. To include; scoping cyclical contracts and major works, keeping caretakers informed of contractors information and relevant regular visits by utilities.
8	The check on 'My Account' login found problems with registration and errors with some information presented. These problems are now resolved. The information displayed is not live but updated daily.	Ensure resident consultation and testing is built into the project planned to improve 'My Account' login. Consider the following improvements when scoping the project: displaying local issues communication; history of all contacts displayed for the resident to see; live information or more updates than once a day; faster and more reliable registration and login.
9	The experience at Crossways suggest that there may always be minority of residents who will not respond to our communication even when they are directly impacted by the information.	In future similar projects, Octavia to ensure it builds in the resources to carry out some in person visits to those residents who may not engage using any other communication method. The electronic noticeboard requires further testing.
10	A number of key staff fed back that they and some residents were not well informed about the translation and interpretation service used by Octavia.	Promote Octavia's main translation and interpretation services on the website, in the Update newsletter, and on notice boards. In addition promote these services to Octavia staff through the intranet and at team meetings.

6.2 SSP are asked for their comments and to approve the recommendations. We will also report on the scrutiny project to the Tenants Steering Group for their comments, and to the Board for final approval.

6.3 Once recommendations are approved by the Board, we will ask the lead operational staff member/s to respond to the recommendations and propose a related action plan.