

Get engaged

Testing different communications methods for
engaging and retaining social housing customers

August 2018

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Get engaged: Testing different communications methods for engaging and retaining social housing customers, Jim Vine,
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Published July 2018
© HACT 2018
ISBN 978-1-911056-12-6
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HACT is registered as the Housing Associations' Charitable Trust, charity number 1096829, company number 04560091.

This document may be cited as:

“Vine, Jim, HACT (2018) *Get engaged: Testing different communications methods for engaging and retaining social housing customers*”

Summary

Two randomised controlled trials (RCT) were conducted in partnership with Hyde Housing Group's support service to test the possibility of:

1. maintaining engagement from the point when tenants are referred to the support service to when they are receiving support (i.e., decreasing attrition), and
2. improving engagement with a hard-to-reach group of tenants.

The first trial looked at maintaining engagement through testing two different interventions, which were delivered at different stages in the support service process.

The first intervention was an SMS text message, sent before the initial call from the gateway advisors (who serve as a triage function). The SMS was designed to prime tenants to let them know to expect a call with an offer of support from the Gateway team. The impact of this in maintaining engagement of tenants was compared to a control group who did not receive the SMS message.

The second intervention was a new form of the letter sent after engagement with a gateway advisor, designed using techniques informed by behavioural science; the new letter was compared against the existing letter that was previously sent out at that stage in the process.

The trial produced a total of three results which assess what proportion of tenants remained engaged. The effectiveness of the SMS intervention was measured at two subsequent points in the process - engagement with a gateway advisor and engagement with a specialist advisor - and the new letter measured at just one point - engagement with a specialist advisor.

All three results were inconclusive because in each case the confidence interval covers a range that includes both higher and lower levels of engagement, when comparing the intervention to its respective control situation. For the SMS, the comparison to tenants who were not sent an SMS was particularly close, giving estimates of 1.1% higher engagement with specialist advisors and -3.6% for engagement with gateway advisors (negative values indicate fewer tenants engaging when an SMS was sent than when no SMS was sent); at both stages the confidence intervals span well into positive and negative values (-5.5 to 7.8% and -11.1 to 3.8%, respectively).

The difference in the proportions of tenants who remained engaged following the letters were more distinct, with 7.7% more tenants remaining engaged when receiving the new letter than old. This, however, should not be interpreted as providing conclusive evidence of improvement, with the confidence interval spanning the range -3 to 18.3%.

The second trial looked at improving engagement from tenants facing court action for arrears who engage with Hyde's support advisors. Again, a new letter was designed using techniques informed by behavioural science, and this was tested against the old letter.

Similar to the previous trial, there were two results which assess what proportion of tenants that remained engaged - engagement with a specialist advisor and engagement with a gateway advisor.

The new letter was found to be superior to the old letter: only 4.9% of the tenants sent the old letter engaged with the service's specialist advisors, whilst for the tenants sent the new letter this figure increased to 15.2%. This represents an increase of 10.3%. Similar improvements were found in relation to the secondary outcome measure (the rate of engagement with the Gateway triage service).

Confidence intervals were calculated around these estimates of the improvements: **the interval estimate for the difference is 3 to 17.7%**. These intervals are useful for illustrating that there is some uncertainty around the effect size, and that somewhat different results might be observed if the trial were run again.

This project has demonstrated that it is possible to undertake a robust RCT in a housing association context. It highlights that the findings from such studies can sometimes be inconclusive and that an intervention that might be expected to be effective (such as an SMS to encourage engagement) might turn out to not be strongly supported by evidence when tested. This suggests that more such interventions should be robustly tested through RCTs, especially where they are costly to deploy, since they may not always be as effective as might be assumed.

Background

Hyde Housing Group is a group of not-for-profit housing associations, providing homes to over 40,000 households, mainly in London and South East England.

Hyde Plus is the Group's social investment team. It exists to help tenants sustain their tenancies and access opportunities, as well as working on wider community issues in the areas where Hyde operates.¹ It has a particular focus on those tenants who are experiencing disadvantages.²

Hyde Plus's activity includes the offer of specialist support services to its tenants. The forms of support include:

- money and debt advice
- digital inclusion, and
- employment and training support.

The provision of these services has dual motivations: as a social landlord, Hyde exists to deliver a social mission, and is keen to ensure that those tenants facing hardship are supported to achieve their potential; as a business, it needs to ensure that its income streams are sustained, so ensuring that tenants can pay their rent is hoped to contribute to business viability.

Hyde has adopted a model whereby tenants are referred into these support services by staff working in other parts of the

organisation, including housing officers and income collection officers. There is also the possibility for tenants to self-refer however these tenants were not the focus for the trials. A proportion of those who are referred unfortunately do not engage with the support services. Hyde Plus was keen to reduce the proportion of non-engagement, to ensure that those who might benefit from the support take it up when offered.

One stream of referrals into these support services comes from Hyde's income team. Each week the income team provides Hyde Plus with a list of tenants who are due in court because of their rent arrears. Hyde Plus contacts these tenants by letter and invites them to make contact to use the money and debt advice service. The rate of uptake amongst this group has historically been very low.

HACT has been supporting housing associations to investigate approaches to tenancy sustainment for several years.³ It has also supported the sector in being able to produce robust evidence of the effectiveness of interventions.⁴ This study is part of a broader project bringing together these two streams of HACT's work, producing robust evidence related to interventions designed to improve tenancy sustainment.

1 Hyde Housing Association Limited, 2016, p. 10

2 Hyde Housing Association Limited, 2016, p. 22

3 Rallings, 2014

4 Vine, 2016a

Methodology

Approach

To investigate whether new communication approaches were more effective than the existing process at engaging with tenants, two randomised controlled trials (RCT) were designed. An RCT acts by taking a group of participants and allocating them at random to receive different interventions. The RCT approach is often viewed as a gold standard of research, because it significantly reduces the possibility that any difference found could be due to anything other than the different interventions. Alternative approaches — for example, first trying out the old letter for a while and then the new letter — tend to leave open the possibility that something else changed at the same time as the switch between letters.

To randomise the participants in the trials, an online randomisation tool was used to ensure that the randomisations were not open to influence (i.e., no one would have been able to deliberately filter tenants that they believed were more or less likely to engage into either of the groups). The group that each tenant was in was also stored in a part of the system that was not visible to the advisors, meaning that they were not influenced by the randomisations when marking that a tenant had engaged or not.

Analysis

The differing levels of engagement between the control and intervention groups are reported here as an absolute measure (prevalence difference).

The prevalence difference is simply the difference between the prevalence of an outcome between two groups. For example, if 50% of tenants in the control (old letter) group engaged and 55% of tenants in the intervention (new letter) group engaged, the prevalence difference would be $55 - 50\% = 5\%$ more tenants engaged with the support services due to the new letter.

The analysis plan also specified that 95% confidence intervals would be calculated for the results. These confidence intervals give an indication of the uncertainty in the value presented, and reflect the expectation that somewhat different results would be observed if the trial were run again.

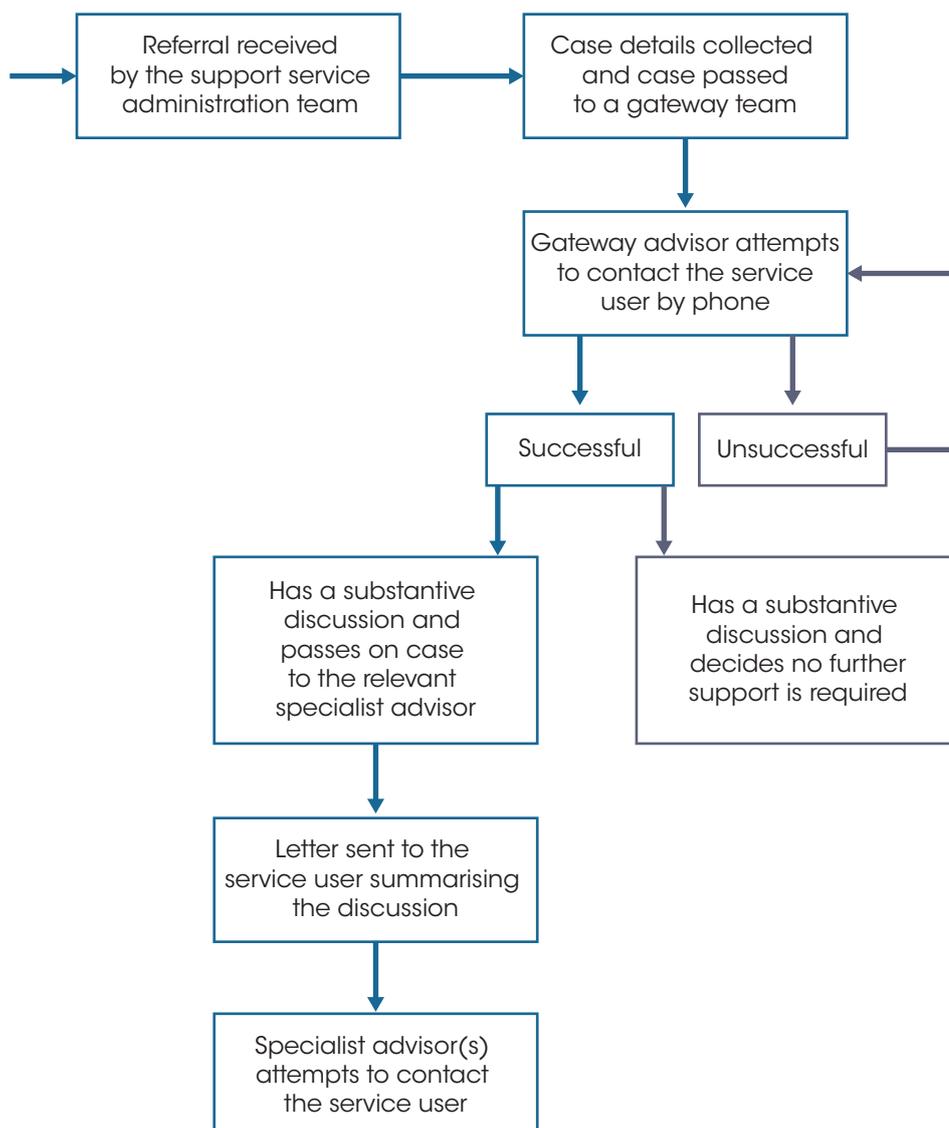
An intervention was deemed to be statistically more effective than the control if the 95% confidence intervals excluded zero and all values worse than zero and deemed to be statistically less effective if 95% confidence intervals included all values that are at least 2% worse than the existing, otherwise the intervention was deemed to be as good the control.

First trial – maintaining engagement through communication methods

Hyde and HACT set about reviewing the existing process when tenants were referred to better understand the customer journey and the points of disengagement. The broad process is summarised in Figure 1 below.

We identified there were two attrition points in this process: some of those referred never engaged with the gateway advisors; and some who had an initial discussion with a gateway advisor did not engage with the specialist advisor(s).

Figure 1: Referral process from administration team through to specialist adviser



Consequently, we aimed to design and test interventions that would improve engagement through each of these stages. An SMS was designed to be sent by the administrative team before the gateway advisors attempted to contact the tenants, with the intention that this should reduce drop-off at the initial stage. An SMS was used, as opposed to other communication methods, as sending an SMS to prospective users is a relatively quick and cheap task that administrators could implement at the point of entering tenants onto the case management system. It was also felt that Hyde were more likely to have tenant phone numbers rather than email addresses. A new letter was design to follow contact with gateway advisors.

Each of the new communications was designed to include features that have been found to be effective in various behavioural science trials in the past.⁵ The SMS featured personalisation, an appeal to social norms (through highlighting the number of people who access support services), positivity of framing, and a reference to the benefits that can be obtained through accessing the support.

5: Sanders, S. and Kirkman, E. (2014) I'VE BOOKED YOU A PLACE. Good luck: a field experiment applying behavioural science to improve attendance at high-impact recruitment events <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/media-library/sites/cmpo/documents/WebVersion.pdf>

East: Four Simple Ways to apply behavioural insights <http://www.behaviouralinsights.co.uk/publications/east-four-simple-ways-to-apply-behavioural-insights/>

The letter was designed to be forward-looking (rather than dwelling on past problems), as well as being clearer and shorter than the old version.

The SMS text read:

“Hi {TENANT NAME}. {ADVISOR NAME} will call about Hyde’s free advice soon. In 2015 3987 tenants increased income, got jobs, etc. In 2016 we could help you too!”

Full copies of both the old and new letter templates are available in the study protocol.⁶ Other than the letters themselves and the presence or absence of an SMS, the interventions received by participants in each group were designed to be identical.

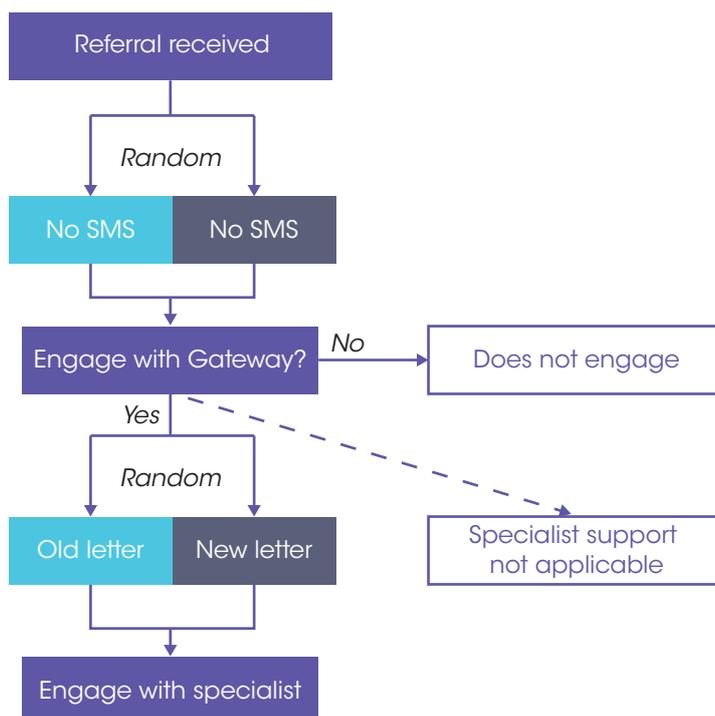
A summary of the study process, including the two points at which interventions were tested, is shown in figure 2, page 9.

To investigate whether these new communications were more effective than the existing process at engaging with the tenants, each tenant was randomised into one of four groups:

	No SMS	SMS
Old letter	A No SMS Old letter	B SMS Old letter
New letter	C No SMS New letter	D SMS New letter

6: Vine, 2016c

Figure 2: Study process



For analysis, the engagement of those in groups A and C were combined and compared against those in groups B and D combined for assessing the effect of the SMS. Similarly, groups A and B combined were compared against C and D combined for the comparison of the letters.

In the case of the letters, only those who were sent a letter were included in the analysis: the people who were excluded from the analysis on the grounds of not having been sent letters were mostly those who did not engage with the gateway advisors, and the minority of people who the gateway advisors

felt were not appropriate for referral to a specialist advisor.

The overall aim of the programme of advice is to support tenants to sustain their tenancies where possible. However, since the adjustments being made were only to the engagement process, the primary aim of the trial was to see whether engagement was improved. (It was hoped, of course, that if this happened, improved tenancy outcomes would follow.)

Consequently, the primary outcome of interest for the study was an increase in the

number of people engaging with the specialist support services. The effectiveness of the new letter compared to the old letter was to be assessed by the differing proportions of tenants being engaged with specialist advisors between those getting each letter. Increased engagement with the specialist advisors was also the primary outcome of interest for the SMS, but as that was delivered earlier in the process a

secondary outcome was also specified: the engagement with the gateway service.

Measurement of the engagement with gateway advisors was of interest as it would help to identify if, for example, the SMS improved engagement with the gateway service, but this improvement was not sustained into improved engagement with the specialist advisors for some reason.

Results

Prevalence differences for engagement outcomes

Absolute measure results (SMS)

Measure	SMS (N=345)	No SMS (N=348)	Difference	95% Confidence Interval of difference	Interpretation
Proportion engaged with specialist support service at 28 days	28.1% (N=97)	27% (N=94)	1.1%	-5.5% to 7.8%	<i>Inconclusive: SMS not shown to be statistically more effective than No SMS</i>
Proportion engaged with gateway team at 28 days	46.1% (N=159)	49.7% (N=173)	-3.6%	-11.1% to 3.8%	<i>Inconclusive: SMS not shown to be statistically more effective than No SMS</i>

Absolute measure results (letter)

Measure	New letter (N=131)	Old letter (N=124)	Difference	95% Confidence Interval of difference	Interpretation
Proportion engaged with specialist support service at 28 days	78.6% (N=102)	71.0% (N=88)	7.7%	-3% to 18.3%	<i>Inconclusive: New letter not shown to be statistically more effective than old letter.</i>

Summary

The findings show that — in this context — there was little evidence that adding an SMS to the process affected the proportion of tenants who would engage with a support service. This does not, of course, rule out the possibility that SMS messages might usefully improve engagement (or achieve other outcomes of interest) in other contexts, but it does suggest that they should not be assumed to be a tool that will help in all cases.

The new letter, designed with techniques from behavioural science in mind, was associated with a higher proportion of tenants (7.7% more tenants) engaging with the support service amongst those receiving the new letter (78.6%) compared

to those receiving the old letter (71.0%) . This, however, should not be interpreted as providing conclusive evidence of improvement, with the confidence interval spanning the range -3 to 18.3% more engagement (or less engagement for the negative values in the confidence interval). Therefore, the new letter wasn't seen to be better or worse than the current process and as the costs are identical a change in letter could still be implemented without effecting the outcome.

Second trial – communication methods for at risk tenancies

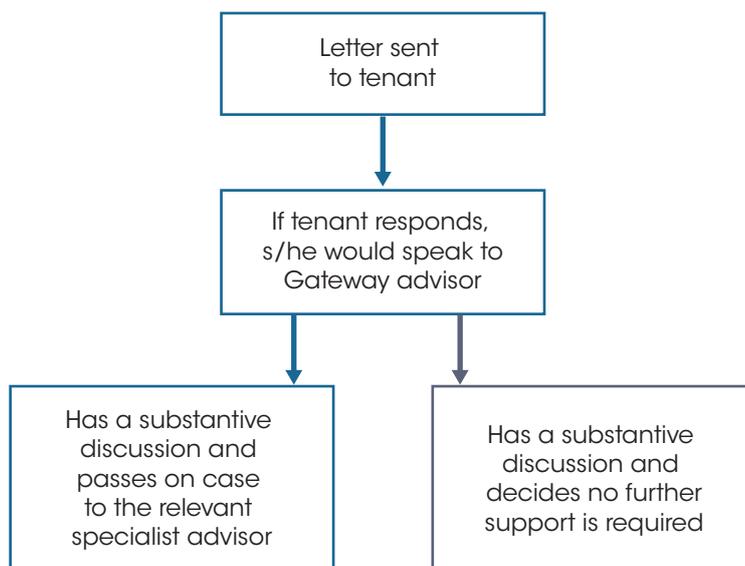
Hyde and HACT set about reviewing the existing communications methods used to attempt to engage with the tenants who are facing court action. The broad process being used is shown in figure 3.

We identified that the letter sent to these tenants received a very low response rate. Consequently, we sought to design an alternative letter to attempt to improve the response rate. We used a behavioural science-informed approach to create a letter that we hoped would be likely to receive an increased response rate.

The new letter included the following features:

- It was significantly shorter (approximately 230 words vs. 740 words) and simpler than the old letter, with lots of the existing information removed.
- The ‘call to action’ (“Please contact us today...”) was made as clear as possible and not hidden amongst lots of other information.
- The contact details were presented very clearly, with an aim of lowering friction and making it as simple as possible to access the service.

Figure 3: Referral process for at risk tenancies



- It stated the (large) number of the housing association's tenants that use the service per year, making use of the power of social norms to encourage a desired course of action.⁷
- It talked about the most immediate benefits as these may be particularly compelling in encouraging adoption of a desired course of action.

service but that this improvement was not sustained into improved engagement with the specialist advisors for some reason.

Further secondary outcomes have also been specified in relation to tenancy outcomes. Data on these are not yet available but will be reported in due course.

Full copies of both the old and new letter templates are available in the study protocol.⁸

As with the first trial, the overall aim of the programme of advice is to support tenants to sustain their tenancies where possible.

The primary outcome of interest for the study was the prevalence of engagement with the specialist support services. The effectiveness of the new letter compared to the old letter was to be assessed by the differing proportions of tenants being engaged with specialist advisors. A secondary outcome was also specified: the engagement with the Gateway service, which would help to identify if, for example, the new letter improved engagement with the Gateway

7: One technique that sometimes encourages increased uptake of a service is to show that most people perform the desired action. Although uptake is low through this route, many of the housing association's tenants do make use of the support services, and the number of these was quoted to demonstrate that it is a common activity.

8: Vine, 2016c

Results

Absolute measure results (SMS)

Measure	New letter (N=125)	Existing letter SMS (N=123)	Difference	95% Confidence Interval of difference	Interpretation
Proportion engaged with specialist support service at 28 days	15.2% (N=19)	4.9% (N=6)	10.3%	3% to 17.7%	New letter superior to existing letter
Proportion engaged with gateway team at 28 days	18.4% (N=23)	5.7% (N=7)	12.7%	4.8% to 20.6%	New letter superior to existing letter

Summary

The findings of this trial show higher proportions of tenants engaging with the support service amongst those receiving the new letter compared to those receiving the old letter. The higher engagement was evident at the intermediate stage of engaging with the Gateway (triage) team and was sustained at the (more important) engagement with specialist advisors.

Conclusions and practical implications

Whilst the results for the first trial are inconclusive, it is at least plausible that the redesigned letter was contributing to improved engagement compared to the old letter. Since this engagement is a vital prerequisite for housing providers' support services to be able to give support to tenants, identifying effective interventions remains important.

Those operating in similar contexts should consider undertaking similar redesigns of their letters, and should test those redesigns to check whether they deliver the outcomes that are hoped for. The success of running this study opens the potential for more housing providers to use RCTs to test their interventions, to improve the sector's understanding of what works.

Consequently, the results from the second trial demonstrates that, in this context, redesigning an engagement letter could boost support service engagement with a group of tenants that had historically had very low levels of engagement and were at real risk of tenancy failure due to rent arrears.

Supporting these tenants, where possible, is of high importance to social housing providers: such tenancy failures are significant to housing providers both in terms of their need to collect rent to remain financially viable and as social organisations that do not lightly withdraw homes from potentially vulnerable people.

To be able to provide support, advisory services must first engage with the tenants, so boosting engagement is an essential first step that may ultimately help more of these tenants to sustain their tenancies, pay their rent, and remain in their homes.

Those operating in similar contexts should consider testing similar redesigns of communications. Whilst hard-to-reach groups may remain hard-to-reach, they are not always impossible-to-reach, and better-designed communications have the potential to improve engagement.

The trials also highlight that the findings from such studies can sometimes be inconclusive, and shows that an intervention that might be expected to be effective (such as an SMS to encourage engagement) might turn out not to be strongly supported by evidence when tested. This suggests that more such interventions should be robustly tested through RCTs, especially where they are costly to deploy, since they may not always be as effective as might be assumed.

When conducting future RCTs and similar studies, housing providers should consider piloting any new interventions before commencing the main study. One of the deviations reported in this study related to an additional letter variant being required, which became clear a few days after the project started. If it had been possible to pilot the new interventions for a couple of weeks

before the trial proper (not necessarily randomly) this would potentially have been discovered and could have been included in the protocol.

In this case there was a clear way of adapting the version of the intervention stated in the protocol, so this did not materially affect the trial's validity, but in other cases an unexpected situation might be more distinct from the planned approach, resulting in larger changes being made during the trial.

Appendix A

Full registered details of method and deviations

Full details of the method adopted were specified in a registered protocol prior to the study commencing (Vine, 2016c). The use of a registered protocol helps to guarantee the reliability of the study: by registering the method in full in advance, anyone receiving the results can check that the researchers have not 'moved the goalposts' to present them in a particular light.

Each trial was conducted in line with that registered protocol, except for a few deviations. These deviations have also been openly published (Vine, 2016d), and this transparency enables anyone to check that they did not fundamentally alter the registered approach and hence do not undermine the robustness of the findings.

As with the registration of the protocol before the study commenced, the analysis of the results was also specified in a registered analysis plan before data analysis commenced (Vine, 2016b). The preparation and registration of an analysis plan acts in a similar fashion to the registration of the protocol, by providing confidence that the analysis was conducted fairly, and demonstrating that the analysis approach was not altered when looking at the data to find the most favourable presentation.

In addition, the code used to conduct the analysis and the (anonymised) participant-level data are being published, to enable others to check the work. The study was conducted (including the specification of the protocol) in line with a standardised approach (Vine, 2016a), further supporting the rigour of the work.

Deviations related to the first trial:

- An additional variant of the new letter was designed early in the trial, since an unforeseen outcome of gateway conversations was encountered (where a referral to specialist advice was made, but without an appointment being set). This variant letter closely followed the general form of the other variants.
- Seven tenants, who were participants in another trial running at the same time, were incorrectly randomised using the randomisation tool for this trial. They did not receive the interventions from this trial, and were not included in any of the analysis of this trial.
- A 'mystery shopper' was randomised into this trial. Although this situation was not foreseen in the protocol, it was clear that this person should not be treated as a participant, so was not included in the analysis.
- A person was referred to receive support and was randomised into this trial, at the

same time as meeting the eligibility criteria for accessing support through another route. This person excluded from the analysis, by analogy with the protocol's statement that those already in the support system should not be eligible for inclusion in this study.

- Six tenants who were not eligible for participation in the study were randomised as if they were participants. (Five were not eligible since their interaction was not related to the activities and contact being studied; one was not eligible because they were already working with an advisor.)
- Due to a technical glitch, one participant received two allocations from the randomisation tool. The participant was treated according to one of these randomisations, so was included in the analysis according to that entry.
- One participant was submitted to the randomisation tool using the wrong identification number (a case reference number rather than a tenancy ID number). This did not prevent unique identification of the participant, so they were still able to be included in the analysis as normal.

Together, these represent a total of 17 people: 15 people were excluded from analysis, one person was included in the analysis but their incorrect additional allocation was excluded, and one person was included despite mis-identification. This compares to 693 participants included in the study.

One further deviation relating to participants is formally documented: the recruitment period for the study both started and ended later than anticipated in the study protocol (approximately one month).

In addition to the deviations related to participants, one change was made to the planned analysis after the protocol was registered but before the analysis plan was produced (and hence before the analysis was conducted). The protocol had specified that a type of analysis called “non-inferiority” would be used to assess each of the interventions. In a noninferiority analysis, the tested intervention is assessed to see whether it seems to be at least as good as the control intervention, but does not need to be shown to be better.

This type of analysis is typically chosen where the new intervention does not have any significant additional costs associated, so we would be happy to adopt it even if it does not improve outcomes. In running the study, it was realised that sending the SMS introduced additional processes for the administrators to undertake, so it was felt that it would only be adopted if it produced better engagement than not sending an SMS. Consequently, the analysis was changed to a “superiority” approach (i.e., testing whether sending an SMS was better than not sending one).

The decision to make the change was published in the record of deviations

(Vine, 2016d) and the approach selected (superiority analysis) was detailed in the analysis plan (Vine, 2016b). For the letter intervention, the non-inferiority approach was retained, because there was no additional cost associated with sending the new letter compared to sending the old letter.

Deviations related to the second trial:

- Participants being randomised using the wrong tool, and then being re-randomised using the correct tool before being included in the study (5 people).
- Participants being randomised using the wrong tool, but not being re-randomised using the correct tool, and included in the study based on the wrong tool giving an allocation that could be unambiguously interpreted for this study (2 people).
- A person entering this study alongside being referred to receive support through another route into the service. This was treated as an exclusion criterion, by analogy with the criterion in the protocol stating that those already receiving support should not be eligible for inclusion in this study (1 person).
- A person who was not eligible for participation in the study, on account of not being referred to the support service for any reason, was randomised using the study tool in error. This person was clearly excluded by the protocol's eligibility criteria, so the only deviation is that the criteria were enforced after randomisation in this case, not before (1 person).

Together, these represent a total of 9 people, compared to 248 participants included in the study. In addition, one further deviation is formally documented: the recruitment period for the study both started and ended later than anticipated in the study protocol (approximately 1 month).

Appendix B

Study details and documentation 1

Descriptive title of study	Impact of communication methods on engagement with support services offered by a social landlord: a randomised controlled trial.
Protocol registration details	<p>The protocol for the study (Vine, 2016c) was archived in a registration at OSF on 2016-01-25. DOI:10.17605/OSF.IO/NS3QF. Direct link: https://osf.io/6ywb7/.</p> <p>Pre-analysis protocol deviations (Vine, 2016d) were archived in a registration at OSF on 2016-11-10. DOI:10.17605/OSF.IO/DERSM. Direct link: https://osf.io/q5w42/.</p>
Analysis plan	The analysis plan for the study was archived in a registration at OSF on 2016-12-21. DOI:10.17605/OSF.IO/W4BFM. Direct link: https://osf.io/3766m/ . (Vine, 2016b).

Study details and documentation 2

Descriptive title of study	Effects of communication on uptake of a social landlord's money advice for tenants at risk of eviction: a randomised controlled trial.
Protocol registration details	<p>The protocol for the study (Vine, 2016c) was archived in a registration at OSF on 2016-01-25. DOI:10.17605/OSF.IO/D6U78. Direct link: https://osf.io/4awk6/.</p> <p>Pre-analysis protocol deviations (Vine, 2016d) were archived in a registration at OSF on 2016-11-10. DOI:10.17605/OSF.IO/NCF4A. Direct link: https://osf.io/eaesb/.</p>
Analysis plan	The analysis plan for the study was archived in a registration at OSF on 2016-12-21. DOI:10.17605/OSF.IO/E8QPW. Direct link: https://osf.io/t5u6y/ . (Vine, 2016b).

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Contributors and acknowledgements

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Review of intervention designs. Intervention design. Project management support.

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Administration of study at study site. Liaison between practitioner team delivering interventions and research team. Data extraction / collation.

Graeme MacLennan, University of Aberdeen

Statistical advice. Comments and guidance on analysis plan.

Mary-Kathryn Rallings Adams, HACT

Project management. Liaison with project funders.

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Study design advice. Comments and guidance on study design and protocol. Advice on approaches to matters arising during study.

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Preparation of protocol and study design.
Intervention design. Recording deviations from protocol. Drafting analysis plan.
Conducting analysis. Preparation of reports.

Acknowledgements

Thanks are also due to Hyde, L&Q, Riverside, Sovereign and Yarlinton for their support of the study.



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HACT Insight

Get engaged: Testing different communications methods for engaging and retaining social housing customers, Jim Vine,
HACT

Published July 2018
© HACT 2018
ISBN 978-1-911056-12-6

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