Are you housing a great brand?

Abel Monitor 2016: housing association brands
Almost three decades after the stock transfer process began, housing associations have got their own house in order and are looking at new ways of delivering on their social purpose. But there are new challenges afoot: new and different audiences to connect with, an array of different ‘hats’ to wear and if that wasn’t enough, the Government’s enforced rent reduction. Our Abel monitor considers whether the sector is meeting these challenges by strengthening their communications and housing great brands. Or howlers. Read on and find out.

Overview

What we did - this document captures a review of the brands and publicly available communications of 50 different housing associations, and how well they perform across a range of criteria. As far as we are aware, no other similar brand monitor exists.

Why we did it - for housing associations, for some time now the only constant has been change. This state of flux has meant becoming relevant to new and different audiences and supporting a wider range of services to deliver on social purpose. Since this places a demand on the brand, this should mean the sector has some great examples and yet this has never universally been the case. The Government’s rent reduction will undoubtedly prompt consolidation in the sector and during the period of this monitor alone, the ripples are already being felt. So today it’s more important than ever to ensure the brands of the sector powerfully reflect each association’s heritage, purpose, relevance and strength.

How we did it - we defined a group of 50 organisations, drawn from some of the largest and most established housing associations in the country. Despite the all-important need to deliver on social purpose, in theory, it is these organisations that will have the greater need and the greater capacity to develop strong, professional communications.

We defined our measurement criteria as follows:

Messaging - is there a clear articulation of ‘who we are and what we’re for’? Is there more emotive messaging encompassing ‘how we do things and why we exist’? Is the organisation’s differentiation apparent? Is it all well written and easy to find?

Visual brand - are there discernible and coherent visual basic elements? Is there sufficient breadth in those defined visual basic elements? Are they appropriate to the stature of the organisation and true to message?

Consistency - is the visual system consistently applied? Does it translate effectively across different applications? If applied consistently does this play out flexibly or relentlessly?

Quality - is the overall brand and communications execution of a high standard and quality?

Saliency - is the overall impression appropriate for the organisation’s key audiences and core purpose?
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Each organisation was scored between 0-20 on their perceived success against these criteria. The scores were decided upon by a panel encompassing our own strategy and design teams, together with a respected professional from the housing association sector. To arrive at the scores we reviewed each organisation’s website, as well as at least one printed document or key downloadable PDF. This focus was driven not only by what was available to us, but also took account of the disproportionate importance that websites have today in terms of making the right impact.

**Shape of the landscape**

The landscape for housing associations is defined by shifting sands and new challenges. In fact, the picture has been evolving since the mass stock transfer began almost three decades ago. Today, for many housing associations there are challenges on all fronts.

**More and different audiences** - there is a wider and eclectic range of audiences to communicate effectively with. The financial community, social housing customers, local and central Government, other housing associations, house buyers, developers: the usual suspects and some new ones besides. However, the dearth of affordable housing and the need to find new ways to finance social purpose, means that the profile and demographic of customers is changing, as well as becoming more varied. Shared ownership and market rent is on the rise, and the profile of those accessing it is changing, with an increase in the number of young (and not so young) professionals amongst them. For those housing associations offering homes for sale, the gap between customer types is closing and becoming more of a spectrum.

**Demanding new and varied services** - social housing has been joined by market rent, shared ownership and even homes for sale. Whilst housing associations’ core purpose has remained constant, how this purpose is funded has changed. Some associations are broadening their skill base and capability, and expanding into maintenance services, meeting the needs of other housing associations as well as their own customers. For those entering the homes for sale market, it means communicating and competing in a whole new space, with an array of very different brands to a group of people with a very different mindset.

**In a sector preparing for consolidation** - the ripples from George Osborne’s rent reforms are likely to be felt for some time to come. Whatever the possible impact on house building, it will inevitably lead to consolidation in the sector as brands, as well as organisations merge. It’s also likely to lead to greater diversification by those organisations remaining, as they seek new and ever more effective ways to help those in need.
### Results: top five and best of the rest

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Housing association</th>
<th>Messaging</th>
<th>Visual brand</th>
<th>Consistency</th>
<th>Quality</th>
<th>Saliency</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bromford Housing Group</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>A good balance of high quality imagery and messaging that feels appropriate and customer focused, without feeling profligate. The overall impression is very cohesive; recognisable but not relentless.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Circle Housing Group</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>A strong, simple identity that uses purple to hold together different types of communications for different audiences. Though the messaging could work harder the overall impression is consistent and high quality.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affinity Sutton</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>A more corporate impression is created through a fresh but cool colour palette and a focus on properties rather than people in the photography. Communications are carefully considered for different audiences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Places for People Group</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>Immediately feels strong and vibrant through the use of colour and typography, but there's a distinct lack of human warmth, which the name suggests, due to limited use of people photography.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One Housing Group</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>A confident, credible impression that feels clean and structured. All the elements are good in themselves but the way they are used together varies in quality and consistency.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midland Heart</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>The varied use of colours means the overall impression is not as consistent as it could be. But the high quality people photography works well across the different audience applications, and shows a real sense of care.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Mosaic Housing</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>An interesting name and some really good bits don't come together as strongly as they could. The result is a lack of consistency and feels like a missed opportunity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Guinness Partnership</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>Portrait photography is strong and believable, but is let down by the other elements. The use of a single colour helps to deliver consistency, but the choice of colour, which affects the overall impression, feels dull and dated.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peabody Group</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>A number of solid, straightforward elements, but that feel a little disconnected when used together. Different audience communications demonstrate saliency, but lack consistency.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cross Keys Homes</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>A bright, vibrant impression across all materials delivers instant recognition and consistency. However messaging lacks the same impact and there is a danger that the strong consistency will become relentless.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Abel Monitor 2016: housing association brands
## Housing Association  
### Messaging  
### Visual \n### Consistency  
### Quality  
### Saliency  
### %  
### Notes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Housing Association</th>
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<th>%</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thames Valley Housing</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>Best of the messaging is buried in the website and what's on the surface is more dry and a little apologetic. From development of the Fizzy sub brand to the overall look and feel, the brand is considered and consistent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anchor Trust</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>Colour and photography provides some consistency. The overall look and feel is relatively salient with its focused target audience. An opportunity for rich messaging is a little lost.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sovereign Housing Association</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>Mismatch between the logo and the remainder of the brand, suggesting that they were developed at different times. Messaging tells a story but lengthy and at times a little too retrospective.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southern Housing Group</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Corporate, ‘vernacular’ look and feel, with relative consistency and saliency. Lacks a clear information architecture, which undermines navigation. Overall quality could be improved.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notting Hill Housing</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Messaging reasonable but a real lost opportunity given the heritage of NHH. Overall brand reasonably consistent and of a standard, and relatively distinctive. However, it lacks provenance and meaning, and the quality could be higher.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DCH</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>Both the labelling of the messaging and the messaging itself makes a real effort at authenticity. The use of film provides some warmth. Colour provides some consistency but lacks quality and sophistication.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L&amp;Q</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>Everything of a standard, with messaging and saliency its points of strength, but all a little too ‘B&amp;Q’. Another missed opportunity in terms of excellence, considered but just a little too crude.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your Housing Group</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>Relatively clear messaging, though rather too focused on the past and on the inside. A distinct visual theme that holds things together but lacks clear meaning. The tree device in the logo compromises its readability.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metropolitan Housing Trust</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>Nice logo, colour palette and iconography style, but the overall visual language could have greater pace. Clear purpose statement but perhaps lacks emotional content.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Hyde Group</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>Unconventional logo with hidden name embedded in it. Vernacular colour palette and imagery, yet the overall look and feel is a little more property developer than housing association.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A2Dominion Group</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>A clear attempt to tackle the challenges of the new world head on, with a family of brands and contemporary ‘developer’ look and feel. However the roles and relationship between the brands is not as clear as it might be.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sanctuary Group</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>A slightly uncomfortable array of sub brands linked by name alone and a look and feel that at times lacks warmth.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stonewater</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>The coldness of the visual brand that feels rather ‘estate agent’ is counteracted by just a little appropriate heart and soul in the messaging.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genesis</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>A consistent but relatively unrefined visual expression that lacks sophistication and warmth. However the angles and triangles are visually aligned to Thames Valley Housing, with whom there is a proposed merger.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aster Group</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>A sense of family, coherence and warmth in the master brand and sub brands. Some of the supporting imagery is a little naive in style. The messaging has immediacy but lacks originality.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Riverside Group</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>A strong attempt at a consistent brand and clear message, but the power of it is lost in its application, which is a little heavy handed and lacking depth.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gentoo Group</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>A strong sense of self, real personality and stand out, contemporary. However, it could have greater depth and sophistication – and why a penguin?!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catalyst Housing</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Contrived and complex logo that dances to a different tune from the overall visual language. ‘Better’ messaging is emotive and customer focused, but slightly lost in the lower level of the website.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EMH Group</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>A relatively complex family of brands that could perhaps be brought closer. An attempt to build a clear visual system, but the look and feel could have greater provenance, and relevance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paradigm Housing Group</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Development of richer, audience facing messages would work more effectively than the ‘belief circle’. The logo is more of a graphic icon and less of a logo. Beyond the use of blue, little discernible visual language.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Results: rest of the rest

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Plus Dane Housing Group</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>A staid visual language and indistinct logo, has a breath of fresh air from Value for Money Statement and Annual Report that would do well to reinvent the brand.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orbit Group</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>A discernible family of sub brands, though the purpose of the regional sub brands seems unclear. An investment in messaging, though a need to summarise it and turn the message fully outwards.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home Group</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>A recent investment in the brand and website has provided some improvements. However, the user journey has multiple layers and ‘opening doors’ messaging is lost in its full expression, which is overlong and too many clicks away.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Wessex Group</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>A visual expression that is a little too ‘identikit’ and indistinct, with heavy-handed use of colour and other visual elements. ‘My Wessex’ a nice attempt at personalisation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bpha</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>The extrapolated letterforms in the logo have been temporarily replaced by a 25th anniversary logo. The brand promises more than it delivers, with a visual language that is considered but lacks depth and an approach to case studies that isn’t reflected in the messaging.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accent Group</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>A logo that attempts to communicate too much and a visual expression too reliant on ‘housing association’ blue alone. Messaging not distinctive and a bit too inwardly focused.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isos Group</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>‘Everyday we make someone’s life better’ a great sentiment that isn’t explained or expressed in the visual brand. (New?) illustrations provide some warmth and personality to a visual brand that otherwise lacks it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yorkshire Housing</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>A slightly confusing family of brands. Some investment in recent Value for Money statement and Customer Annual Report could be reflected back into the brand. Overall a brand that isn’t quite ‘pulled off’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hanover Housing Association</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>A clear and focused offer, a logo that tries too hard but says too little and an indistinct visual language.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wakefield and District Housing</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Messaging that promises but then goes on too much. Colour palette and logo that lack sophistication. But clear that some effort to connect through the brand is being made.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WM Housing Group</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Relatively ownable visual elements applied with too heavy a hand. Some nice language but insufficiently expansive.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rochdale Boroughwide Housing</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>A recent investment in the website has provided some improvement. Nice headline message or strapline, but it is hard to find the explanation of how this is unpacked.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AmicusHorizon</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Unsophisticated logo, strapline lacking depth and personality, the overall impression is heavy handed and key documents such as the Value for Money Statement appear to have been created in Word.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swan Housing Association</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>An uncomfortable balance between wordmark and logo symbol, and a strapline that is far too long. The investment in mission and values formula for messaging would benefit from being spent on more effective customer facing messaging.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bolton At Home</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Dated and the overall impression is a little home made. Nice customer facing story that is a little too buried on the website and could be summarised more effectively.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aldwyck Housing Group</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Very ‘corporate blue’, too many stock shot images of models and few ‘real customers, lacks warmth and saliency.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plymouth Community Homes</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Some warmth and passion that fails to translate into an effective brand with discernible basic elements (beyond the logo and use of blue).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing &amp; Care 21</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>The 21st century message doesn’t come through sufficiently in the brand and provides some confusion with focus on over 65s. Corporate blue, a logo that has benefited from some consideration but little else to grab hold of.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great Places Housing Group</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Grass logo, heavy handed use of colour, little that’s ownable and some warm, authentic photography.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Viridian</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>A logo that feels very ‘out of sector’ and a colour palette that lacks warmth. A recent investment in the website but appears ‘off the shelf’ and this compromises the customer journey.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Bromford.

“Providing people with a place to call home has always been important to us, but a few years back we realised that people need a lot more than just bricks and mortar.”

What we say
Bromford scores highly across the board. The whole brand feels really appropriate, high quality without feeling profligate.

Messaging is very customer focused with clear statements about making things better, both internally and externally. ‘Helping people to be the very best they can,’ ‘Help us to be our best,’ and there’s a real sense that they take the time to understand their customers’ individual stories.

The tone of voice is clear and helpful. The logo is understated but strong, the orange full point becoming a subtle graphic device that helps to unify communications. Warm grey and orange deliver recognition but are not overpowering, and there is a wider palette of supporting colours. The standard of photography is particularly high. Images capture real, positive, believable moments, which is a lot harder to achieve than it sounds. And the compositions draw you into the images with confident use of angles and focus. Typography is strong, simple and distinctive with bold messages across all communications.

The overall impression is consistent without being relentless, with communications tailored for different audiences but clearly from the same family.
Top 5: second place
Circle Housing Group

“We don’t just build houses, we create sustainable communities for everyone through a business head and social heart. Ultimately, people are at the heart of everything we do.”

What we say
Circle Housing have recently announced a merger with Affinity Sutton - so one to watch in the future.

They describe themselves as an ‘organisation of many parts which come together as one family’ and have created a separate but clearly related brand, Centra, for their services. Separate websites for the different brands connect easily, but follow different navigation styles so feel a little disjointed, and information is sometimes hard to find.

Messaging is generally straightforward, with a few glimmers of more interesting language - ‘business head and social heart’.

The name and logo are simple and memorable, with Centra clearly part of the family. The use of purple delivers a huge amount of recognition; the strong, varied shades are balanced with more neutral tones preventing the purple becoming too overpowering.

Different approaches for customers and the corporate audience are both appropriate in their own way, and clearly part of the same world. Photography is good quality and believable, typography is distinctive but credible and icons are used well in a supporting role.

A single colour and distinctive typeface help to deliver consistency across communications that are appropriate and high quality.

Messaging: 11/20
Consistency: 17/20
Saliency: 15/20
Quality: 14/20
Overall: 72%
Top 5: third place
Affinity Sutton

“First and foremost a landlord, we aim to provide great customer service to our residents, as well as support for those in need. We manage and maintain our homes to a good standard by investing in them.”

What we say
Affinity Sutton have recently announced a merger with Circle Housing – so one to watch in the future.

‘Helping people put down roots’ is a nice statement but could work harder; core messaging is clear and straightforward but leads with talk of scale and heritage.

The logo is quite complex and ambitious. Though it has a lot of life in it, it feels overworked compared to other housing brands and is problematic to reproduce, losing its spirit when reversed out white.

The colour palette, derived from the logo, feels fresh but rather cool, and is used carefully to complement the imagery.

Photography features more properties than people, which adds to the cool impression. Cartoon like characters are combined with real photography to explain services; it’s a distinctive approach but in danger of becoming patronising.

Communications are carefully considered for different audiences, though the overall impression is slightly cooler and more corporate.
The initial impression is bold and vibrant. Colour is strong and varied, and the bold typography stands out. But scratch the surface and it feels like there’s a missed opportunity to bring the name, and the message it conveys, to life both visually and verbally.

There is a distinct lack of people photography, particularly noticeable because of the name. Images focus on places rather than people, resulting in a lack of humanity and warmth. The messaging is dry and corporate, and also lacks any warmth or personality.

The lower case letterforms of the logo feel simple and friendly; the orange symbol adding a spark of life. However it’s over-complicated by an unwieldy brand architecture with a proliferation of sub-brands.

The annual review and financial statements have a much stronger link than in other housing associations. But the result is that they both feel very corporate.

The film ‘We are places for people’ gives a palpable sense of who they are and shows the passion behind the organisation. The wider range of communications would benefit from some of this human warmth.

“Customers are at the heart of everything we do. We’ve been building homes since 1965, and today we create award-winning developments”
Top 5: fifth place
One Housing Group

What we say
A confident approach that holds together well across different applications.
They’ve nailed a really clear, simple articulation of what they do. Everyone is broadly doing the same thing, but struggle to say it so succinctly, with a tone that is straightforward and approachable. Overall the language is down to earth and honest.
A simple logo supports the name, with a sense of completeness and direction.
The colour palette takes a lead from the logo and is vibrant without being garish.

“One Housing exists to help people live better. We do this by creating homes for people who struggle to afford a place to live. We provide care and support to thousands of people in the community and we help people to get work and stand on their own two feet. We fund all of this by building and selling homes on the open market.”

“Color palette takes a lead from the logo of completeness and direction. A simple logo supports the name, with a sense of approachable. Overall the language is down to earth and honest.

The dark blue anchors it with some stature and credibility. Coloured blends and gradients add life, giving a sense of ownership to images. But they can get in the way when poorly executed, distancing the viewer. There’s some really good people photography, but close cropping, which can be really effective, often feels awkward and poorly considered.
Some inconsistencies in the design of the report make it hard to navigate, and lowers the feeling of quality. The website has recently been refreshed and the attention to detail really shows. A bit of fine-tuning across the brand would help to lift everything even further.

Messaging: 12/20
Consistency: 12/20
Saliency: 13/20
Visual brand: 13/20
Quality: 13/20
Overall: 63%
"Midland Heart is a leading UK housing care and support business – we transform lives and communities through housing, care and opportunity."

What we say
A real sense of care runs through Midland Heart’s brand. Care is a key service provided, but it feels like the way they do things too.

Heart in the name and a heart in the logo may be obvious but it feels like an appropriate motif. Photography is high quality, positive and focuses on people as individuals. People are real and believable, with a sense of vitality and showing the emotional benefit of being cared for.

A warm, soft palette adds vibrancy to the website and an understated sophistication to the financial statement. But the varied use of colour means the overall impression is not as consistent as it could be.

The customer Annual Report is short and simple with information broken down into manageable chunks and combined with graphic icons, the website is clear and easy to navigate.

Messaging is generally clear and straightforward, but some well-chosen words and phrases highlight the sense of care and lift the spirits.

A more consistent use of warm colours and more engaging messaging would support the strong photography and lift this brand further.
Best of the rest
Family Mosaic Housing

“We provide good quality, affordable homes to rent and buy, as well as care and support services to thousands of people who need extra support.”

What we say
The name itself is interesting, quirky even, and suggests an understanding of the varied nature of customers and their individual needs. However this notion is not brought to life throughout the brand.

Fragments of illustrations on the website support the name, but they feel randomly placed and could be used more powerfully.

The logo is very simple, and easy to apply as a tag, lowercase typography feels friendly and accessible. The curved edge is replicated on the website but this is not carried over into print.

The corporate and customer reports are appropriate for their audiences, but have little holding them together except the logo.

‘We can’ is a dominant strapline on the website, but is not substantiated. It is starting to pull through in headline copy but when explained, in relation to values the articulation is clunky. A missed opportunity.

There are some really good bits, some great customer photography, personal case studies and strong messaging, but overall it lacks cohesion. The name itself could act as a springboard for a distinctive brand expression both visually and verbally. Another missed opportunity.

Messaging: 13/20
Consistency: 9/20
Saliency: 13/20
Quality: 12/20
Overall: 58%
Best of the rest
The Guinness Partnership

"The Guinness Partnership owns and manages nearly 60,000 homes, employs around 3,000 members of staff, and provides services for more than 120,000 customers nationwide."

What we say
Colour is a powerful tool in delivering consistency and it certainly helps here. A single colour dominates all communications, though the choice is odd. A sludgy shade of green which feels rather dated.
The logo has been recently refreshed moving to lower case typography and a jauntily positioned ‘G’. It certainly feels more modern and approachable, but the colour isn’t helping.
Messaging is dry and functional. The strapline emphasises ‘great’, but this sense of spirit feels rather forced and isn’t evidenced elsewhere.

People photography is good, with a focus on portraits. Looking directly at camera the impression is real and believable, direct and honest.
Consistency is further enhanced by the use of icons across all communications. Simply drawn in an ownable style these are clear and used carefully to support communication.
It’s all perfectly competent and well thought through, but a little on the dull side.

Messaging: 11/20
Consistency: 12/20
Saliency: 12/20
Quality: 12/20
Overall: 57%
Best of the rest
Peabody Group

“We’re one of the oldest and largest housing associations in London. We own and manage more than 27,000 homes across the capital, housing around 80,000 residents.”

What we say
Individually there are a number of good elements, but they don’t hold together particularly well.

The logo has a quality feel, understated and sophisticated; people photography is good, real and believable, if a little staid and the colour palette is solid and dependable.

There is a clear split between corporate and customer audiences. The Annual Report almost feels like it’s trying too hard with its use of colour washes and big numbers; it feels a little heavy handed and at odds with everything else.

There’s a missed opportunity with the messaging. The organisation has a rich heritage, founded by the social visionary George Peabody. But this pioneering spirit is lost in the history, rather than invigorating the brand, particularly the messaging, with a sense of purpose.

All the ingredients are there, they just need to be handled differently.

Message: 10/20
Consistency: 11/20
Quality: 13/20
Saliency: 13/20
Overall: 57%
What we say

A very recent re-brand moves away from the rather obvious cross keys logo, and shifts the name towards CKH. It’s deliberately bright, vibrant, modern and instantly recognisable.

The logo shapes represent the five values, so has meaning for internal audiences but is less obvious externally. The logo itself has a strong presence; the shapes translated into graphic elements used consistently across all communications. The colours are bright and jewel like, with transparencies as they overlap, adding vibrancy.

Whilst it has immediate impact, there’s a danger it will become tired and difficult to sustain as it only works at one level.

The challenge will be to evolve it to become more flexible ensuring that it stands the test of time.

Photography is strong and people focused, supporting the overall positive upbeat impression, and works well in the unusual shapes. Typography is simple, but deliberately friendly with rounded letterforms.

Messaging is dry and straightforward; it would benefit from some of the confidence and vibrancy of the visual expression.

Overall it feels vibrant, friendly, upbeat and positive. Though it feels a bit relentless it has an immediate appeal.

“At our core, Cross Keys Homes is a landlord... But we are also much more than just a landlord. We are a key community player committed to delivering excellent and customer-focused services 100 per cent of the time.”
Conclusions

What we learned

*Ramifications of the Rent Reform are already being felt* – during the relatively short period of time that this monitor has been compiled in, there have already been changes. Mergers (not least Affinity Sutton and Circle), the gradual emergence of brands that feel more aligned to the world of property development (such as A2 Dominion Group), creation of sub brands (for example Thames Valley Housing and ‘Fizzy’) and some investment in brand generally (including One Housing Group). So the need to address brand and communications is not completely lost on the sector.

However, overall, few invest in brand and those who do, don’t always spend wisely – achieving a position in the top quartile of this monitor should not encourage complacency. For many, the quality of communications is not of a high standard. Comparing the results to previous monitors in other sectors, reveals a significant gap in quality. Where investment is made, it is not always made well, with some poor quality design, writing and production in evidence.

*Looking professional without looking profligate* – of course the underlying challenge is to maintain the professionalism and quality of brand communications, without it costing the earth, since the core purpose of housing associations is to help those in need. It is almost as important to not give the impression that things have cost. The cost of poor quality design or failing to invest at all, may be greater than investing carefully in quality. Furthermore, a quick look at players such as Bromford demonstrates it is possible to look professional without looking profligate.

*Basic purpose is articulated quite well but there are few rich stories* – perhaps the most important area to ‘get it right’ is in articulating core purpose. Though fundamental core purpose is articulated reasonably well by many, the results are dry and homogeneous. There are too many who lay claim to be ‘leading’ and too few who tell the rich story of their founding, and the difference they make to people’s lives. All too often, messaging is buried too deep in the website, is too lengthy or non existent, or far too internally focused and relating to ‘where we’ve come from’ not ‘where we are and where we’re going’.

*Sector defined by bright colour, happy shiny people and iconography* – there is a clear ‘vernacular’ of the sector and one that fails to stretch into newer services, and audiences. Crucially, in a market where it matters more than ever to know what you stand for and stand out, there are few that do. This provides a real opportunity to differentiate.

Brands are struggling to stretch across new audiences and services – since visual expression and housing association ‘vernacular’ fails to stretch sufficiently, rather than investing in developing a more sophisticated visual language, some are developing sub brands instead. Whilst this will sometimes inevitably be the right answer, all too often the family of brands is managed awkwardly. The user journey between websites can be confusing and the equity of sub brands isn’t always skilfully bestowed back onto the master brand.

What it means

1. Consider the cost of doing nothing – you can’t afford not to invest in your brand and communications
2. Your customer profile isn’t as clear as it once was – you need to communicate with everyone in a more sophisticated manner and don’t forget new, and different audiences such as the finance community
3. Articulating your purpose well matters more than anything – in doing so, ensure you are facing outwards and telling the ‘feelings’ as well as the ‘facts’ of your story
4. Build more stretch into your visual language and messaging – and do this before you consider developing new sub brands since it might be all you need
5. In developing sub brands create a discernible ‘family’ – ensure the relationship between your various brands is clear and that your master brand benefits from the ‘lustre’ of everything you are doing
6. Break out of the housing association vernacular – now more than ever you need to stand out
Conclusions

What next

However well or otherwise your brand is performing, changes should be informed and not undertaken lightly. Any brief should be shaped by an understanding of what you need to do to compete and ‘stand out’ in your landscape, and above all, meet the demands of your corporate plan. The first step towards this is carrying out a detailed audit of your existing brand and communications. If you’ve been included in this report, we can carry out a more detailed audit of your brand. If you haven’t then we’d be happy to do the same.

We do much more than compile our Abel monitors. We’re a creative consultancy of communications specialists. We specialise in brand identity, brand and marketing communications, and internal engagement. We develop strategy, write copy, design creative and implement our recommendations. We focus on business-to-business, higher education, financial services, Government and public sector. We’re Frank, Bright & Abel. Not who we are but what we do and how we do it. Whatever you want us to be get in touch.

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