

Briefing Note

Title: Wolverhampton City Wide Customer Offer**Date: 26/09/2023****Intended Audience:**Internal Partner organisation Public Confidential **Prepared by: Julie Haydon****Job Title: Director Corporate Services**

Purpose

The purpose of the paper is for Wolverhampton Homes to provide Committee with an update on the continued development of the customer offer, which supports the City of Wolverhampton Council's Resident Insight Strategy.

Background

Social Housing has seen some of the most significant changes in housing legislation and regulation in recent years not least with the impact of the post incident Grenfell and Awaab Ishak reviews, alongside the publication of the Social Housing Green Paper in 2018. This paper initially set out proposals to rebalance the relationship between residents and landlords. This was followed by the publication of the White Paper; The Charter for Social Housing Residents which sets out how the government plans to ensure that residents feel safe, have a voice, live in good quality homes and that they know how and when to raise complaints.

There have also been a number of regulatory changes, that have been designed to put customers safety and voice at the heart of activity and decision making. Most recently the Social Housing (Regulation) Act 2023 received Royal Assent earlier this year. Other relevant legislation includes:

- Charter for Social Housing Residents (2021) – Regulator of Social Housing
- Fire Safety (England) Regulations (2022)
- Domestic Abuse Act (2021)
- Building Safety Act (2022)
- Housing Ombudsman spotlight reports

Effective from April 2023, landlords are also required to collect data in respect of the Tenant Satisfaction Measures which will be published by the Landlord in April 2024. These measures are designed to make performance more visible to tenants and to help tenants hold landlords to account.

The challenges facing local authorities and housing provider with the requirements and costs associated with the new legislation are a tough ask for finely balanced Housing Revenue Accounts (HRAs). Wolverhampton Homes are also facing increased financial pressures due to the ongoing economic crisis and rising costs.

With the myriad of pressure facing the housing sector, in collaboration with the City of Wolverhampton Council, Wolverhampton Homes was committed to reviewing how services were provided. This provided opportunity to engage with customers while identifying efficiencies and new ways of working to meet new and changing customer demand and expectations. This approach "Our Future" detailed a number of ways in which Wolverhampton Homes would work to ensure that service delivery better reflects the needs and wants of the communities we serve.

It has been important for Wolverhampton Homes to understand customer preferences, and a STAR survey was undertaken to understand customer contact and access needs. A number of customer contact options were presented, including new ways of delivering our services - which would result in the cessation of services through One Stop Shops. Almost three quarters of customers felt the proposed new customer service model would have a mostly positive impact on them. Many statutory authorities were also moving towards a model that supports customers' needs through other methods of contact.

In line with the council's Relight Our City campaign at that time, the joint decision was made to move towards a city-wide hub approach to work towards an improved outreach offer to customers. Communication in October 2021 to Councillors, staff and customers identified the approach was to make the best use of the city's community assets, for example community centres and libraries, to ensure that our customers have access to services in a way, and at a time, that suits them which are also aligned to the council's delivery model. This work continues.

Wolverhampton Homes continues to provide a frontline service within the council's customer services outlet where we are able to support those customers with more complex needs and which has received positive feedback.

Our experience through surveys, consultation, and other insight, demonstrates that the majority of customers do not wish to have contact with us on a face-to-face basis. Many prefer other methods. However, where customers do request face to face support, we are able to make the necessary arrangements.

We continue to work on reducing call waiting times, complemented by a number of digital advances, including the launch of a new customer app, should support a further reduction to those customers currently contacting Wolverhampton Homes by telephone.

The Our Future plans continue to progress in relation to customer contact and access with a number of workstreams including end to end customer journey mapping, repairs workshops and a tiered approach to customer contact (first point resolution). Our customer contact centre is integral to the work that the company delivers and supports the scheduling and productivity of work. It was also agreed that additional research would be undertaken to ensure we fully understand the needs of some of our most vulnerable customers across the city to enable a tailored approach.

Customers have also told us how important it is to have their questions answered and queries resolved at the earliest point, which has driven the approach to deliver a one touch customer experience, recognised that the increasing demand for services needs to be underpinned with the right technology and advances with system development. This will provide opportunity for customers that wish to digitally interact with us, the option to do so via the new customer app.

Activity

An outline of the activity to date is detailed below.

Customer Experience drives the Our Future plans, and this has seen a focus on:

- Community involvement
- Complaints handling
- Contact and access needs.
- Out of hours service provision
- Corporate social responsibility
- Councillor enquiries

The new customer offer has been developed to provide a Customer Contact strategy which brings together a number of action plans associated with a number of workstreams across the business. This will be shared with the WH customer panel for consultation.

Work has continued with the workstream action plans, and the city has also developed the city-wide resident insight strategy, to provide a one city approach for all managing agents with the aim to further drive the customer offer across the city. Wolverhampton Homes feeds into this strategy.

In relation to the WH delivery plans, please see attached actions to date for information - see Appendix 1.

Future development

Despite significant market uncertainty, housing providers continue to play a huge part in helping to tackle the housing crisis. Further to the Grenfell tragedy, we will continue to see a transformation of the sector and a drive for continued policy change. That, along with the Hackitt Report and the xxx of the political and economic landscape, there are potential knock-on effects to public funding, as well as the availability of materials and labour resource.

As we have seen, welfare reform has had a significant impact on many housing tenants with a raft of changes to benefits some years ago. These changes will continue to contribute to a huge number of people classed in great need: overcrowded accommodation, living with disabilities or ill health, rough sleeping, and homeless and temporary accommodation.

With a lack of affordable housing stock and key risk factors for tenants including fuel and food poverty and lack of access to social care, it is a key challenge to be able to maximise income whilst helping to minimise the risk to our tenants.

The future of customer engagement is built on true consultation and mutual trust between us and our customers and as such, we must listen and act together. Customers must feel valued and know that their input will lead to meaningful change. This requires a change of mindset at Wolverhampton Homes, led from the top, that putting customers first, is the role of everyone in the company.

The use of customer insight and segmentation will allow us to build a deeper and more nuanced understanding of our customers than previously seen and we are looking at ways of analysing the data we hold by demographics such as location, tenant type, tenancy length, age, income etc., but also by persona – what are the wants and needs of our customers that drive satisfaction and dissatisfaction across all touch points of the customer lifecycle: selection, sign up, moving in, managing the home, moving out.

How we engage with our staff to create a customer drive culture is as important as how we engage our customers. We will listen to our employees and partners, empower them to deliver and put the customer first, improve our digital and systems and provide the required training and development.

In creating our customer contact strategy, in line with, and supporting the City's Resident Involvement strategy, future plans to ensure that customers are at the heart will see activity under the following four objectives:

1.	Create opportunities for customer voice to ensure more customers are heard
2.	Embrace customer-driven decision making
3.	Develop our customer offer
4.	Improve our own productivity and performance (reducing customer effort)

To enable us to deliver on a:

- modern customer engagement framework to inform all parts of our organisation.
- cultural shift to a customer-driven business, powered by our right first-time approach.
- customer performance culture, built with clear guidelines and tools, supported by new technology and training.
- more trusting relationship with customers, where they are treated as equals.
- seamless digital services to increase customer access and give them more control of their tenancies.
- platform for engaging policymakers to help shape sectoral policy.

Appendix 1

Support the delivery of the overarching Resident, Influence, and Insight strategy (previously referred to as customer experience) and associated action plans:

- The City of Wolverhampton Council leads the strategy and have recent developed the draft Resident, Influence, and Insight Strategy – WH are working with the City's Housing Strategy team in relation to the sign off of the strategy which directs the customer offer city wide and for which WH, along with other managing agents feed into the action plan.
- Working alongside the Council in relation to the establishment of the Customer Scrutiny Panel which will support the drivers for the development of the customer involvement framework for WH.
- Development and launch of the Corporate Social Responsibility and Community Investment strategy – launched in November 2022 with residents and community groups from across the city.
- Centralisation of front-line customer contact services - Customer Experience – contact centres [24hr] and the Customer Resolution team
- Our Future - driving new ways of working looking at a tiered approach for customers enabling a first point of resolution.
- Tenant panel recruited – scheduled to be in place Q3.

Ensure consistent advice is provided at all frontline touch points:

- Continued reduction of call waiting times
- Increased number of customer service advisors in Contact Centre
- Face to face provision provided at the Civic Centre – reviewed and plans to increase.
- End to end customer journey mapping
- Review of all Service instructions – with CWC
- City of Wolverhampton Council (out of hours service provision) – updated service instructions
- Community newsletter
- Tenant Resident Association meetings attended.
- Tenancy Officers / Concierge officers out on site – local knowledge supports.
- See it Report it – successful launch providing staff ability to identify and report any vulnerabilities noted for customers.
- Health Homes Advisors x 3 in post to support tenants with issues of damp and mould
- 12 month no contact access – ensures all tenants receive contact at least once in every 12-month period.
- Income officers work out on patch – driving up contact to prevent debt accruing/increasing and offering access to Money Smart team.

Integration of solution focused outcomes into business delivery – ensuring learning from complaints is identified and addressed:

- Customer service training – mandatory across the business
- Development and launch of the customer Engage App (Q3 2023)
- Annual report
- Multi-agency approach via family hubs
- Creation of capacity within the income team to ensure debt prevention and tenancy sustainment.

- Increase of customers moving to Universal Credit
- Early intervention from Money Smart Team
- Money Smart Team based at Job Centre on a regular basis to advise new claimants to Universal Credit
- WH officer located with the MASH team at the City of Wolverhampton Council (multi-agency approach)
- Review and realignment of complaints process
- Learning from complaints process in place

Resident involvement, influence, and strategy:

- Development of the Resident Insight Strategy by the city – consultation with customers and stakeholder to determine the customer offer across the city for the council and all managing agents.
- Participation in the Tenant Satisfaction Measures (led by City of Wolverhampton Council from April 2023)
- Satisfaction surveys over several customer contact areas
- Development of Customer Offer document
- Launch of the customer panel

Communications:

- Our Future infographic – driving new ways of working looking at a tiered approach for customers to contact staff as a first point of resolution.
- Customer offer – under development following the creation of the resident insight strategy.
- Draft Customer involvement framework – further development in relation to customer involvement.
- Facebook live events
- Building safety resident awareness raising
- Website link: <https://www.wolverhamptonhomes.org.uk/>