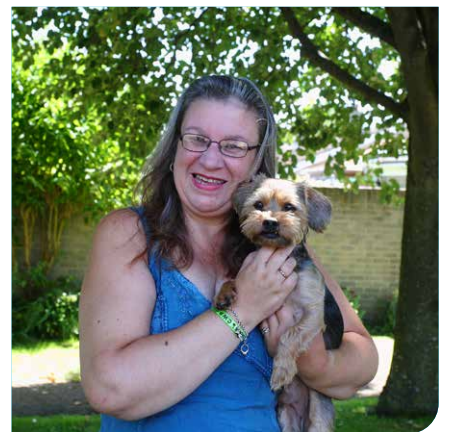


Our Customer Engagement Strategy 2022-2025



INTRODUCTION

This Customer Engagement Strategy has been written at a time of significant change in the housing sector, when there is greater focus on involving and empowering customers and on improving transparency and accountability.

The publication of the Social Housing White Paper 'The Charter for Social Housing Residents' in 2020 showed a renewed commitment to strengthening regulation, particularly in relation to the consumer standards and to ensuring that landlords hear the 'Customer Voice'. Of particular relevance to this strategy are sections two, four and five of the White Paper which state:

- 2: **To know how your landlord is performing**, including on repairs, complaints and safety, and how it spends its money, so you can hold it to account.
- 4: **To be treated with respect**, backed by a strong consumer regulator and improved consumer standards for tenants.
- 5: **To have your voice heard by your landlord**, for example through regular meetings, scrutiny panels or being on its Board.

As well as delivering on the requirements of the White Paper this strategy also takes account of the need to meet and, ideally, exceed the requirements of the Regulator of Social Housing's (RSH) Consumer Standards, specifically the Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard and the Neighbourhood and Community Standard.

As early adopters of the National Housing Federation's (NHF) Together with Tenants Charter we are well placed to build on our achievements to date and to ensure our culture is one that is open and accountable and strengthens our relationship with our customers.

In addition, the NHF Code of Governance has also been revised to include stronger requirements on accountability, decision-making and transparency and has recently been adopted by Cottsway's Board.



There are six commitments in the Together with Tenants Charter and the following four are of particular relevance to this strategy:

- **Relationships:** Housing associations will treat all residents with respect in all of their interactions. Relationships between residents and housing associations will be based on openness, honesty and transparency.
- **Communication:** Residents will receive clear, accessible and timely information from their housing association on the issues that matter to them, including important information about their homes and local community, how the organisation is working to address problems, how the organisation is run, and information about performance on key issues.
- **Voice and influence:** Views from residents will be sought and valued and this information will be used to inform decisions. Every individual resident will feel listened to by their housing association on the issues that matter to them and can speak without fear.
- **Accountability:** Collectively, residents will work in partnership with their housing association to independently scrutinise and hold their housing association to account for the decisions that affect the quality of their homes and services.

Giving customers a voice

As well as the key drivers for change and improvement set out above, as a member of the Tenant Participation Advisory Service (Tpas), we also work in a way that is consistent with the standards set out in their National Engagement Standards. These highlight the importance of the customer voice and help to ensure our culture is one of respect, transparency and accountability.

We recognise the importance of hearing a wide-range of customer views from diverse groups of people, hence our approach to offering a comprehensive suite of satisfaction surveys and a variety of opportunities to engage with us. Our Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Strategy helps to ensure we offer inclusive services and our EDI Group monitors satisfaction across a number of the protected characteristics (age, disability, ethnicity, gender, sexuality).

Finally, a key influence on this strategy has been the voice of our customers.

At the end of 2021 we completed our regulatory consultation, asking our customers not only how they want to engage with us to have their voices heard and influence the services we provide, but also looking at other themes in the White Paper, including being safe in your home and knowing how we are performing.

We had almost 700 responses to our survey and received 759 individual comments. These have helped shape this Customer Engagement Strategy and will help ensure we are delivering not only what we are required to deliver but what our customers tell us they want.



PURPOSE AND SCOPE

The purpose of this strategy is to set out Cottsway's approach to customer engagement, ensuring a shared understanding among stakeholders and a clear, agreed response to national and local priorities. It supports delivery of our Corporate Plan and our values, which are:

- We see Cottsway as a partnership between customers and staff and key stakeholders.
- We will do all we can to provide our customers with decent homes from which they can enhance their lives.
- We are part of, and value, the communities in which we work.
- We are open and transparent about how we do business.
- We are here for the long term.

In terms of scope, it provides a framework that will enable us to meet all the regulatory, legal and sector wide commitments set out in the introduction and to respond to our customers' priorities.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

We have kept similar objectives as our previous Customer Engagement Strategy with the aim of ensuring that we are easy to contact, our customers know our service offer, that we deliver it consistently and effectively and that we report openly and accountably. Our objectives are:

- Understanding our customers and their views
- Empowering our customers
- Enabling communities to thrive.



OBJECTIVE 1:

Understanding our customers and their views

Knowing who our customers are, and their views of Cottsway and our services, enables us to better understand their priorities and to respond to their needs.

This strategy builds on the previous strategy in that we are focusing on gathering feedback from all our customers rather than relying on the views of a few. We do this by using satisfaction surveys, complaints, feedback, social media and consultations.

We know from our 2021 survey that just over 80% of our customers like to respond to surveys and this fits well with our approach of gathering feedback from as diverse a range of customers as possible. However, we also need to ensure we provide other mechanisms, both online and in person, and this strategy sets out a number of initiatives to achieve this.

We also work closely with specialist customer groups' such as our Procurement Working Group and Scrutiny Group to shape our services and decisions.

How we meet the objective

Hearing our customers' views

- We have a robust satisfaction survey programme in place that enables us to collect customer satisfaction data for individual transactions and our overall services.
- We introduced a new survey for residents of our new build properties to better understand their experience of moving into a brand new home.
- We respond to all issues raised by individuals that need addressing in our customer satisfaction surveys.
- We benchmark our customer satisfaction performance with Housemark to understand how well we are performing when compared to similar organisations and use this data to identify under-performing services and then bring about improvements.
- We produce a quarterly 'Customer Voice' report for our Board giving an overview of the feedback, complaints and customer satisfaction we receive in that quarter, ensuring they can see and hear the customer voice.
- We have a well-established Scrutiny Group who see the same performance and customer satisfaction information as managers - they use this to identify areas in need of review and to make recommendations for service improvements.
- We have a Procurement Working Group made up of customers who work with us when procuring customer facing services. Recently they have helped choose a new grounds maintenance contractor and a cleaning contractor.
- We have a robust complaint handling process - identifying and implementing learning from complaints.
- We meet the requirements of the Housing Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code.
- We have a closed Facebook group for Cottsway customers where they can raise issues and share experiences.
- We've mapped open data sources on our GIS system so we can better understand areas of deprivation ie, numbers of children on free school meals, fuel poverty etc.
- All our staff received customer service training in 2021/22 to ensure they provide a professional service and can build respectful relationships with our customers.

Future actions

To build on the success of our current approach over the lifetime of this strategy we will:

- Introduce a new survey to measure customer satisfaction with our contact centre service.
- Review our compliance with the Together with Tenants Charter and identify where and how we can improve.
- Review and improve our quarterly Customer Voice report to Board, ensuring it provides a clear picture of our customers' views.
- Introduce a new quarterly survey to monitor wider customer satisfaction with the cleaning and grounds maintenance service and publish the results.
- Establish a mechanism to enable customers who share communal areas and related services the opportunity to share their experiences with us and with each other.
- Introduce the new Tenant Satisfaction Measures to our main satisfaction survey.
- Recruit new members to our customer Scrutiny Group.
- Introduce a new 'scrutiny assist' mailing list, enabling customers to be directly involved in scrutiny reviews of service areas they are interested in.
- Establish an annual register of contracts requiring involvement of the Procurement Group and continue to recruit and provide training for group members.
- Introduce a new 'Clean and green inspectors' scheme to enable customers to monitor the quality of their local cleaning and grounds maintenance services.
- Ensure all new staff receive customer service training in their induction, supporting them to deliver a professional service and build respectful relationships with customers.
- Review how well we comply with the Housing Ombudsman's Code of Conduct annually and publish the results.



OBJECTIVE 2:

Empowering our customers

For our customers to be empowered to engage with us and hold us to account, they need to know how well we are performing, both for them and in comparison with other landlords. They also need information about their homes and local communities and about Cottsway as an organisation. This information needs to be easily accessible and available in a range of formats.

They also need access to opportunities to build their own skills, knowledge and confidence - supporting not only their ability to be involved effectively with Cottsway and their communities, but to build their capacity for digital engagement and employment, if required.

How we meet the objective

Publishing information

- Each quarter we publish information about the complaints we receive and the learning we have identified from them on our website.
- Each quarter we publish a summary of our customer satisfaction surveys on our website.
- Our Customer Charter sets out the standard of service our customers can expect to receive.
- We publish Homepage biannually and also have a quarterly Communities ezine that is sent to customers on our engagement mailing list.
- Information on our website, in Homepage or in our Communities ezine can be printed and sent to customers on request.
- We publish an Annual Report and Value for Money report.
- We promote our activities in a variety of ways including letters, emails, social media, posters and neighbourhood door-knocks, as required.

Supporting individuals and families

- We provide funding for individual Cottsway customers to support their learning and development through our Community Fund - all applications are voted on by our customers through our closed Facebook group.
- We provide a free, long-term loan of laptops, tablets and wifi dongles to help Cottsway customers get online, plus access to free digital training.
- We provide free access to coaching and mentoring for customers in need of employment support or further education advice.
- We publish information about training opportunities available to our customers online.
- We are members of the Tenant Participation Advisory Service (Tpas) who provide access to training and resources to support engagement.
- We run a small-scale furniture reuse scheme that provides free second-hand furniture, white goods and household items to Cottsway customers in need.
- We provide a base for Witney & West Oxfordshire foodbank at our offices in Witney and can refer our customers who are in need of help and additional support.
- We offer a tenancy support service to customers who need help to sustain their tenancies and pre-tenancy support service for customers who need help to establish their tenancies, including a monthly 'Tenancy Ready' workshop.
- We provide opportunities for young people to access resources through our membership of Oxfordshire Youth, including their Young Leaders course.



Future actions

Publishing information

We will continue to deliver the actions outlined on page 7 and in addition will:

- Introduce a customer-friendly quarterly Star report (Survey of Tenants and Residents).
- Further improve our customer portal to provide access to tailored information on customers' homes, ie boiler instructions, safety certificates, tenancy information etc.
- Promote access to our mailing list of customers who do not have access to the internet and want hard copies of information sent to them.
- Launch a programme of estate inspections that are open to local residents and track repairs and improvements that are identified, making this information available to local residents.
- Review the information we publish on our website and publish more, as suggested by customers who responded to our 2021 consultation.
- Publish a mini-annual report on our progress improving the communal areas of blocks of flats.
- Publish an information booklet on the services we provide to support individuals and communities.
- Introduce bulk text-messaging to promote activities and opportunities in local areas direct to our customers.

Supporting individuals and families

We will continue to deliver the actions outlined on page 7 and in addition will:

- Increase the use of digital volunteers to provide 1-2-1 support for customers learning new digital skills through our partnership with Connect!
- Work with our partner, Travis Perkins Managed Services, to provide work experience opportunities for Cottsway customers who are receiving employment support.
- Promote opportunities for work experience, apprenticeships and graduate trainee placements.
- Develop partnerships with other organisations providing food support, such as the Chippy Larder and Witney Community Larder and Fridge, to better help our customers.
- Develop partnerships with other agencies and voluntary groups to provide additional resources and support to our customers, for example baby banks and Age UK.
- We will make our 'tenancy ready' workshop available to more people in need of support to establish their tenancies through partners such as West Oxfordshire District Council, Connection Support and Citizens' Advice.
- We will increase the use of social value surveys to evaluate the impact of our services.



OBJECTIVE 3:

Enabling communities to thrive

We know that strong and engaged communities are important for the wellbeing of our customers and living in safe, secure and well-maintained homes and neighbourhoods, with little anti-social behaviour, is a priority. Loneliness and isolation are also key issues to be tackled. Working together with our customers, partners and stakeholders to enable thriving communities is therefore a key objective.

How we meet the objective

Supporting the community

- We provide funding for community groups and projects that benefit Cottsway customers through our Community Fund – all applications are voted on by our customers through our [closed Facebook group](#).
- We provide funding and support to recognised Tenant and Resident Associations (TRAs)
- We work closely with local partners and representative groups including the Witney Forum, Carterton Connects and the Chipping Norton Creative to support activities and promote access to our customers.
- We fund the Childrens' Safety Education Foundation (CSEF) to provide money-wise resources in local schools, supporting financial literacy for young people.
- We provide skips on community clear-up days to help local people work together to tidy up their homes and communities – these can be requested through our website.
- Introduced in 2020, we have a budget dedicated to improving the communal areas of blocks of flats so they are safe, secure and pleasant areas for our customers to use.
- We published a Community Engagement Plan 2022-2024 for Chipping Norton.
- We frequently post information on local activities and opportunities on our [closed Facebook group](#) and quarterly ezine.



Future actions

Supporting the community

We will continue to deliver the actions outlined and in addition will:

- Establish a wider network of partners and representative groups across areas where we have new housing in Gloucestershire, Wiltshire and Worcestershire.
- Carry out an energy efficiency feasibility study to ensure we have the right resources in place to support our customers with energy efficiency and the decarbonisation agenda.
- Publish a new Community Engagement Plan for Carterton in 2022/23 and for other areas across the lifetime of this strategy.
- Review and update our package of support for recognised Tenant and Resident Associations (TRAs).
- Promote access to activities that reduce isolation and loneliness either through our Community Fund or in partnership with local organisations.
- Aim to reduce food poverty by promoting access to food banks and community larders, cookery skills courses and free school holiday meals.
- Invite customers to identify areas that would benefit from bulb planting, bird and bat boxes and more wildflowers, and work in partnership with our grounds maintenance contractor to deliver these initiatives within our local communities.

EQUALITY, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

This strategy will ensure Cottsway has a greater understanding of our customers, their neighbourhoods and their priorities, equipping us to respond to issues and achieve social impact in our communities.

It will:

- Promote community cohesion, build capacity and support our commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion.
- Enable us to demonstrate that we meet the required outcome of the Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard to “demonstrate that Registered Providers understand the different needs of their tenants, including in relation to the equality strands and tenants with additional support needs.”

VALUE FOR MONEY

A key driver for all registered providers is the need to demonstrate value for money across all service areas. Our Board has defined our approach to value for money as:

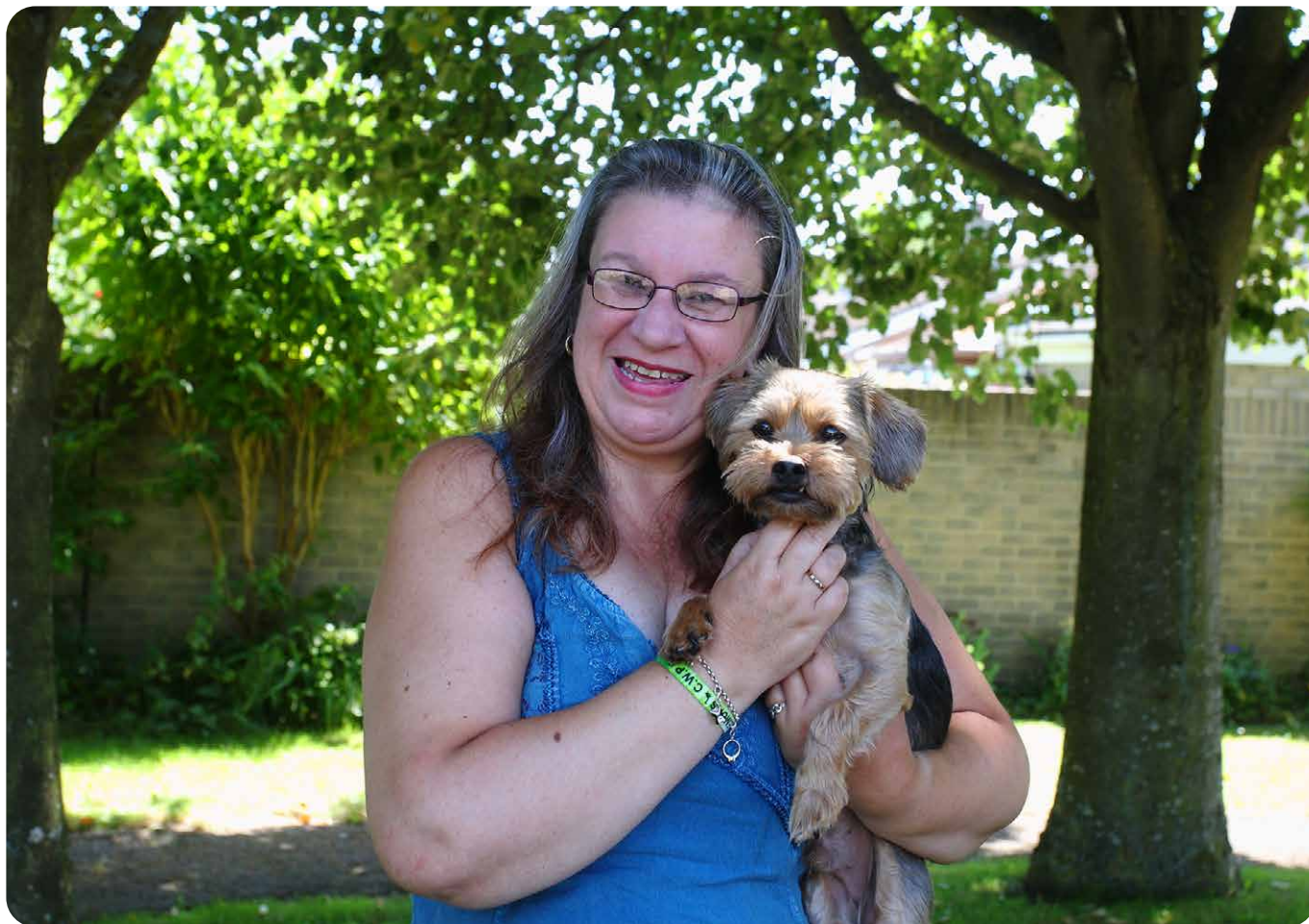
“Working efficiently and effectively in everything we do; we will maximise the return on our assets and maintain or improve customer satisfaction whilst always considering the social and environmental impact of those decisions”.

Customer satisfaction is a key measure of effectiveness in delivering value for money. As our customers cannot easily take their business elsewhere customer satisfaction enables us to determine if they value the services we provide. A study by the University of Westminster demonstrates a strong correlation between involving customers and delivering value for money (Success, satisfaction and scrutiny: The business benefits of involving customers 2015).

MONITORING AND REPORTING

Progress with this strategy will be monitored by the Customer Insight Group (CIG) with reports, as required, to the Corporate Leadership Team and Board. We will also measure the social value of our activities and report this annually.





REFERENCES

- [Cottsway's customer consultation report 2021](#)
- [Cottsway's Corporate Plan 2021-24](#)
- [Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government \(2020\) The Charter for Social Housing Residents, Social Housing White Paper](#)
- [National Housing Federation Together with Tenants Charter](#)
- [University of Westminster \(2015\) Success, satisfaction and scrutiny: The business benefits of involving residents.](#)

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