



Customer Annual Review 2020/21

#stillhereforyou



PRINT EDITION



Welcome to your annual report

I'm so proud to lead the team that serves you at Stonewater. Ultimately, I'm answerable for the things that go right but I'm also responsible for the things that go wrong.

Something I'm also proud of is of how, as a single mum, I raised my son in social housing and I know just how safe and secure it made me feel. I also remember how I felt when things didn't go right – something which I believe has made me a better person to serve you.

2020 was definitely a challenging year for us at Stonewater, and none of us had a script to work from, we just had to keep going and providing services as best we could for our customers.

Serving you

We did get things right, for example letting over 1,800 much needed homes for people including those who found themselves homeless or were fleeing domestic abuse. We also reached out to more than 6,500 customers every week to provide support to those who needed us the most during the pandemic.

We also got some things wrong, but it's testament to a good organisation that we listen to our customers, learn from our mistakes and ensure that we improve in those areas.

This year we've made some significant changes, for example you told us that when you've got a complex issue, such as anti-social behaviour, you wanted to speak to a specialist team. But when it was something simpler, like a request for a parking permit, you just wanted it to be done in the most efficient way possible.

In this review, Still Here for You, you can explore in more detail how we've developed those services.

Thank you

The anxieties and worries of 2020 took a toll on us all. Whether you were affected financially, worried about your nearest and dearest, or just worried about the future; there was a lot of uncertainty around.


But we also saw the best of our communities, with so many of you offering to volunteer to help people get food and medicine or just volunteering your time to try and help others beat the loneliness. This review celebrates all of that and I'd like to offer all of you my personal thanks for everything you've done to help us deliver our services to you.

Thank you

Sue Shirt

Executive Director, Customer Experience





The Scrutiny Panel is a team of customers who volunteer their time to make positive changes at Stonewater. We act as a critical friend to the business, working alongside Stonewater to make things better.

I think the voice of the customer is so important in shaping things for the future, and the reason I joined the panel was because I wanted to help make things better. I thought that if I could change just one thing and make it better for at least one other person, then that would be my drive.

But when you learn that you can make recommendations to the business, which get approved by the board and Stonewater becomes accountable for delivering them, you realise you can make hundreds of lives better.

Our achievements

I am so proud of what the Scrutiny Panel has achieved this year. We've been so committed to delivering even through the disruption of Covid. Like everyone over the past couple of years, we've had our challenges, our highs and our lows, but we've stuck together, and it's all because we share a desire for making things better.

Our anti-social behaviour (ASB) review has seen us produce a brand new customer guide to ASB, which gives you clear advice and tips on how you can deal with it yourself and when Stonewater can help you.

We've also done a review of the responsive repairs service, and we've been looking really closely on social media and the customer hubb to find out what you've been saying, finding out what the common problems are and shaping our review around those issues.

Make your voice heard

We can all go on social media and voice our disapproval, but if you don't get involved, how is your voice going to be heard?

If you think that you can make a change, think you have a solution to a problem you are seeing, we'd love for you to join us – it's a great way to make your voice heard, the more the merrier.

Thank you

Loretta

Chair of the Stonewater Scrutiny Panel

Talking to us

One of the biggest changes we introduced in 2020-21 was the way we capture your feedback.

Working with our partners at Rant & Rave, we can now see your feedback right after you've interacted with us so we can get the most accurate responses.

This data is helping to transform our services every single day as we constantly evaluate how we're doing and make changes to the parts of our business where we need to improve.

In 2020-21, we collected more than 20,000 pieces of Rant & Rave data which we are using to make things better for you.

Complaints

Our new-look Customer Relations Team dealt with 854 complaints in 2020-21.

We know we don't always get it right, but what is important is that we learn from our mistakes so that we can make real changes to prevent them from happening again.

- **You said** create more storage space in communal areas so we did – we reviewed facilities across communal areas and created new storage spaces where prams could be left without affecting communal spaces.
- **You said** make sure customers are always treated with respect so we did - we have rolled out our Customer Promise training to all our customer facing colleagues to improve customer service at every level.

- **You said** provide better advice and support on damp and mould so we did - we created a new programme of support including more property inspections, specialist help, training for colleagues and clearer guidance.
- **You said** you wanted better communication so we did - we launched our Here to Help newsletter during the pandemic. We now send an online newsletter each quarter to customers, with the latest information, news and customer stories.

We'll be sharing updates on our learning throughout the next year and inviting customers to get involved in exciting new projects like Mystery Shopping to help us improve our services faster.

Customer services

When faced with the restrictions of the pandemic we quickly made changes to the way our Customer Services Team works to keep supporting our customers in a difficult time.

In 2020-21, our average call length increased by 25% as we dealt with more complex issues than before. We're really grateful for your patience as we have adapted to the challenges of the pandemic as we know it's frustrating to be on hold when you just want your problem solved.

The extra time on calls however has meant that we have been able to put more things right first time. We want to say a big thank you to everyone who has been using MyHome to quickly resolve queries and questions, giving us more time to support customers with more complex problems.

Making your **voices heard**

We're committed to our company-wide Customer Promise to put you at the heart of everything we do.

The best way for us to do that is by listening to you to find out what matters the most, so that we can make the changes that you want to see.

Recently, we heard from more than 700 customers on the best ways for us to engage with you so we can improve our services, and we're now creating new ways to help us deliver them.

Here's a brief look at the ways we're learning about what matters to you:

Community Champions

Following on from the great work of our Estate Champions, our new Community Champions will be able to get more feedback from you so that we can make things better where you live. You can find out more about our Community Champions on our website.

Surveys

We're undertaking regular surveys to gather your views and experience on our services. Thank you to everyone who did a survey for us in 2020-21.

Mystery Shopping

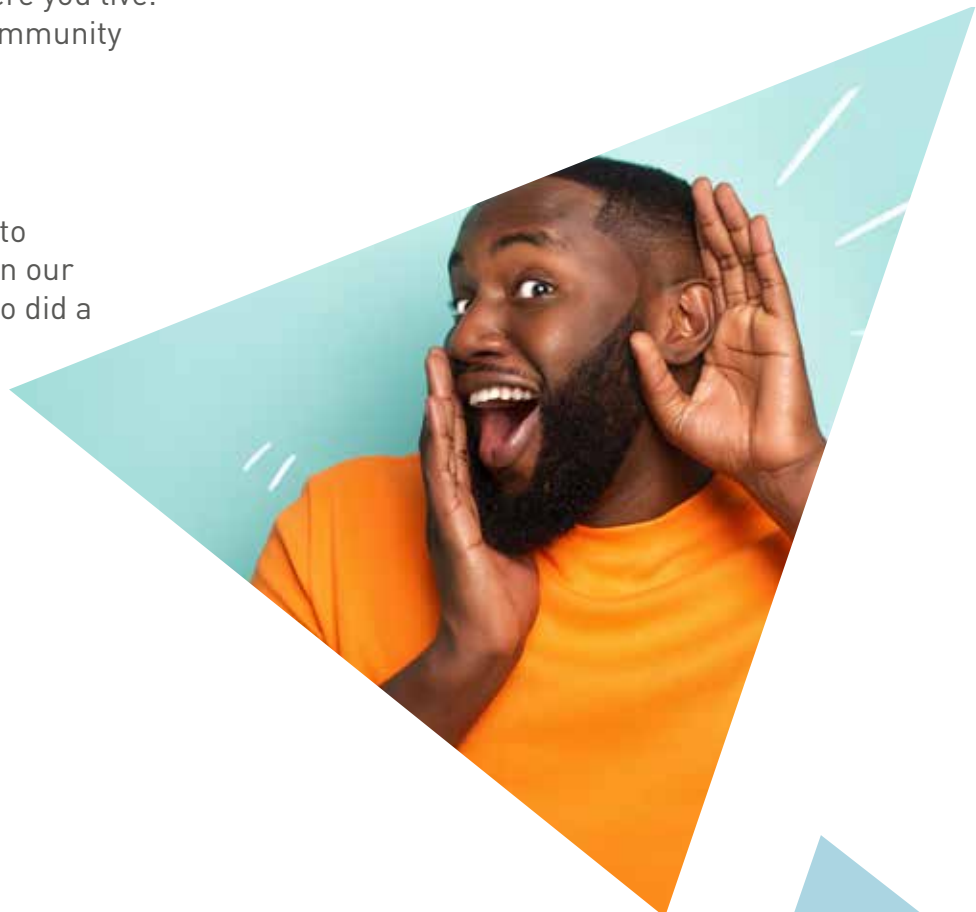
More than 300 customers told us that they'd be interested in becoming mystery shoppers for us so we're developing a new programme to get live feedback on how our services are performing.

Events

We'll be running more coffee mornings, workshops, bake-alongs and other events both on our digital platforms and across our schemes.

Connecting digitally

As well as our Customer Hub, we also run digital forums and we're active on our main Facebook page and Community Group where customers can share feedback, raise issues and connect with their neighbours.



Spotlight on our Scrutiny Panel

Our Scrutiny Panel, created in 2014, is made up of nine customers from across the country.

Using their unique insight, customer feedback and survey data, their job is to work together to review our services and find ways that we can keep improving what we do for the benefit of all our customers.

Like many things in 2020-21, their work was interrupted by Covid, but that didn't stop them from looking at two incredibly important areas of what we do, challenging our processes and making genuine recommendations to improve our services based on your feedback.

Anti-social behaviour and noise complaints

Feedback from our customers around our approach to anti-social behaviour (ASB) in our communities told us that we could be tackling ASB more positively by encouraging people to talk to their neighbours, identifying root causes, and finding creative solutions.

The Scrutiny Panel conducted a full review into how we handle ASB noise nuisance cases which had become a rising issue for our customers due to the time spent at home during the pandemic. This then led to a wider review of how we support customers through ASB cases.

By the end of the review, the panel offered 10 recommendations for improvement. These include making our ASB processes more accessible to customers, making it clearer around what customers can expect from us during a case, when and where we are able to help and when we might need to bring in some extra support to resolve issues.

As a result, we have created a brand-new guide to anti-social behaviour for customers which explains more about what ASB is and how we can support customers who are experiencing it.

Responsive repairs review

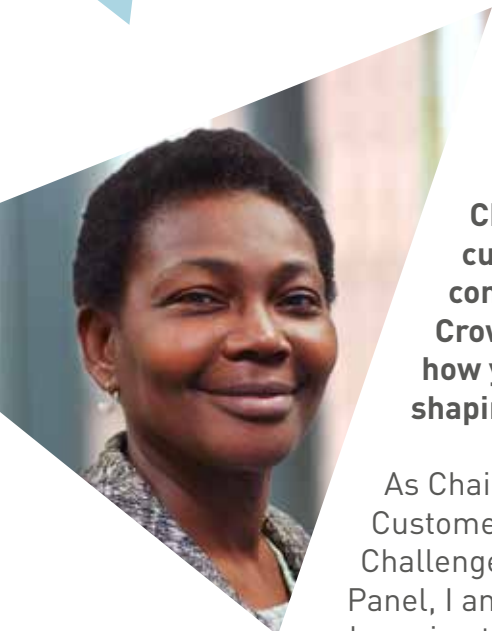
As a housing provider, our repairs service is one of the most important that we offer to customers.

Ahead of a new repairs policy, the Scrutiny Panel began a review to make sure that customers' views were being heard and how the service could be better designed to meet the needs of customers.

Following a review of the existing policy, customer workshops, an extensive customer survey, sessions with staff and investigation into some of our processes and procedures, the panel made 16 recommendations. These covered areas such as performance measurement and reporting, value for money, communications and learning from best practice.

Thanks to the work of the Scrutiny Panel, we are now working on an improved repairs policy, which is due for release in 2021.

How your feedback makes a difference



Chair of our customer experience committee, Juliana Crowe, tells us about how your opinions are shaping our services

As Chair of Stonewater's Customer Experience Challenge and Assurance Panel, I am proud to champion the voice of customers in order to improve services.

The panel includes board members, customers and senior business leaders and our focus is on Stonewater's customer promise; 'if it matters to you, it matters to us'. We look at your feedback to identify ways to change and improve services to better meet customers' needs.

Adapting to a changing world

In the last year, with Covid19, the panel was very busy making sure we could still keep improving services to meet customer needs while working under the restrictions of the pandemic.

As we all know, Covid has changed the world and in some cases, it has accelerated change. The initial shift to working remotely for the majority of Stonewater colleagues in order to keep everyone safe has developed into permanent hybrid working, with people now placed in specialist teams all over the country.

This is allowing Stonewater to create a more consistent service for you, moving away from localised people and teams and making us much more agile, expert and flexible.

Big challenges

During the year we identified both new and existing customers who were facing particular challenges who might have been in need of additional support. For example those trapped at home and facing domestic abuse who needed a safe place to live, people who were struggling to pay their bills or those having to self-isolate and needing help with their shopping and other tasks.

Outside of Covid-related problems, we've also been looking at reducing the impact we have on the environment and making sure that Stonewater has sustainability high up on its agenda.

It was also an important year in celebrating diversity, and I felt inspired by watching the recent Paralympics; a fantastic example of what can be achieved when people are given support to take part and not excluded.

We need you

As you can see Stonewater has some big issues to tackle and we want to face them with our customers. We want you to work with us to shape how we respond and continue to deliver services that meet your needs.

You can get involved in many different ways: Rant & Rave feedback, Facebook, surveys, one of our working groups, volunteer as a community champion or join the scrutiny panel.

Whatever your experience is as a Stonewater customer, your voice could make a difference to thousands of other customers across the country.

I wish everyone all the best in the next year and the panel look forward to hearing from you or even welcoming you as a new member.

Thank you

Juliana Crowe

Chair of the Customer Experience Committee

MyHome

More than 7,000 customers joined MyHome to manage their account with us in 2020-21, taking the total to more than 13,000.

MyHome is our secure online service where you can report a repair, check your account, make payments and get information on our services. It was designed and developed with you, our customers, so it's the easiest and quickest way to handle your everyday needs on your phone, tablet or computer.

We're really pleased that so many of you love using MyHome and we will keep adding more features so it's always the best place to interact with us. Listening to your feedback is how we'll be able to do that.

MyHome in your own time

Another bonus about MyHome is that it's always available, so you can use it when and where it's convenient for you, rather than waiting on the phone.

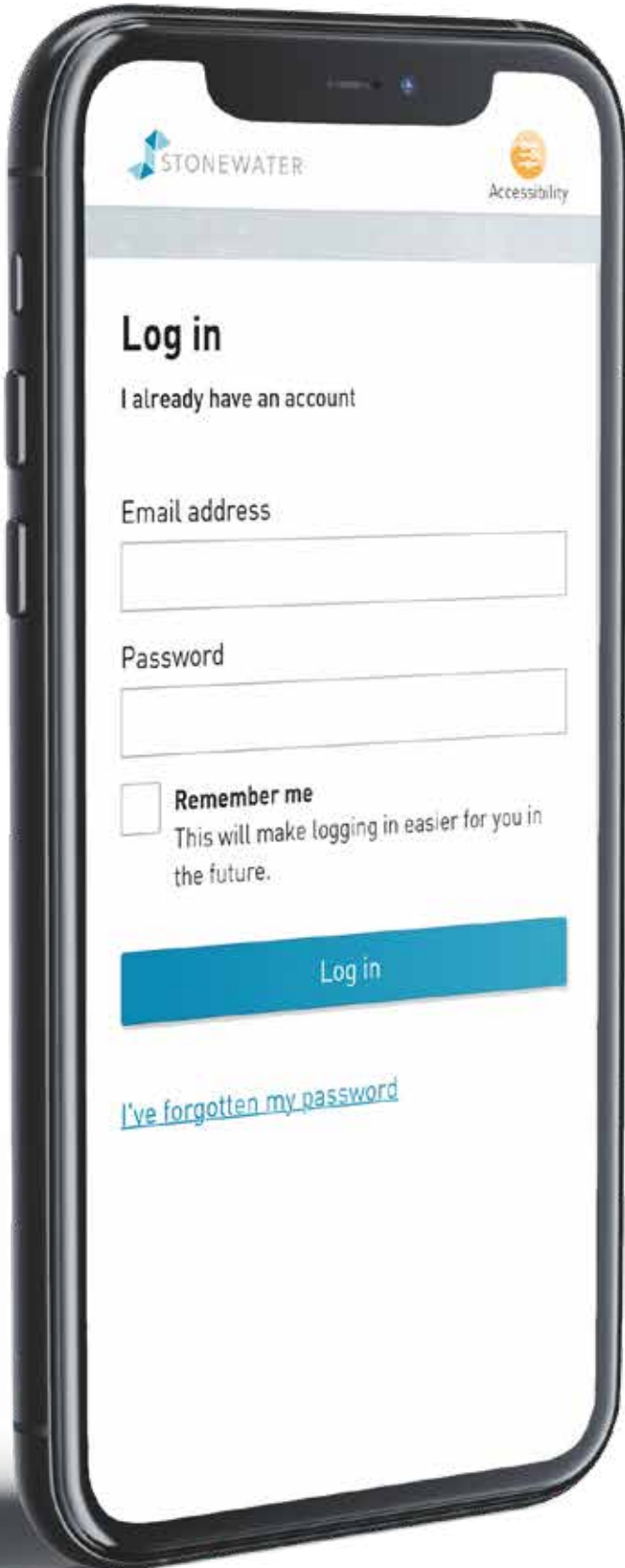
We're proud to support a hugely diverse range of customers all over the UK. There are lots of ways to contact us, MyHome is just one of the ways we are working to make it easier and faster for you to get the services that you need.

If you haven't signed up yet, why not do that now? It only takes a minute. You just need your customer number (which you'll find on your rent letter from us) and then you can sign up on our website.

"On my first time reporting online, I found it easy to use with good, clear instructions."

MyHome customer





Have you registered for MyHome?

It's the fastest way to contact us, and the best way to keep track of your rent and repairs. We know that call centre wait times might be longer than usual.

With MyHome, you can now manage your home in your own time, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, without calling our helpline.



Supporting you financially during the pandemic

Throughout lockdowns and local restrictions, many of us had to make changes to keep on top of our finances in 2020-21.

But whether you were on furlough, were made redundant, dealing with debt, facing unexpected costs or were struggling to find work, we wanted to remind you that we were here to help.

Our Income Team reached out to customers to make sure they knew what support was available, including our flexible payment plans, which have helped customers who were having problems paying their rent. We also worked closely with the National Housing Federation to adopt their pledge to help customers keep their homes and we've committed to not taking legal action where a customer is working with us to improve the situation.

It's really important for us to collect your rent, as the money is vital to fund our service to you, from delivering repairs to helping our customers in need of support. When customers fall into arrears we know that there's usually a good reason, which is why getting in touch quickly is vital so we can get you the help you need.

Throughout the pandemic, we worked closely with partners at local authorities and support agencies, such as Clean Slate and the Longleigh Foundation, to make sure that we could refer customers to the right place to get more help if they told us they were struggling.

We know that some of our customers are facing really tough times, but if you are worried or struggling, we are here to help and we're standing by to talk to you.

Case study: Life changing support

When Sophie (not her real name) found herself in almost £3,000 worth of debt, and was struggling to pay her rent and bills, it was clear she needed help. After a chat with Sam, one of our income officers, things started to turn around.

Sam said: “In this case, Sophie’s benefits weren’t covering her rent and she was struggling. After speaking with her, I was able to establish what support was needed to keep them in their home.

“I was also able to contact foodbanks in the area and as this customer had limited mobility, I was able to get a food parcel delivered to them the next day and for the next couple of weeks.”

Sam and Sophie worked together to get a discretionary housing payment from Sophie’s local authority to stop her from falling further behind on her rent, as well as a personal independence payment to help with other costs.

Sophie said: “The support has made a massive difference in mine and my son’s life. With support, help and understanding of our situation, I’ve been able to turn things around and I’m living with less mental stress and pressure. A massive thank you to Sam for everything.”

Sam said: “These conversations are always difficult and quite often the customer can feel embarrassed, confused and scared. It’s important to gain trust and offer support in a non-judgemental way. I always explain that I am not here to tell people off or make them feel uncomfortable, only to offer my support. I’m always honest and give the best advice I can.”





Funding that enables lives to be transformed

A year nobody saw coming

Andy Peers, Chief Executive at Longleigh Foundation, tells us about supporting people during a truly challenging year.

From those early murmurs of a problem virus in early 2020 to us being a nation in full lockdown by March, the speed in which this all escalated was frightening.

Pretty early into the first lockdown, it became clear that the livelihoods of so many people were being hit, like a rug being pulled out from right under their feet. Added to this were the extra money pressures being placed on families with having children at home all the time. Alongside money worries, and for many reasons, the emotional wellbeing of so many people was affected too.

Supporting people

Here at Longleigh, due to the financial support from Stonewater, we were able to put a far higher amount of funding into our Individual Grants programme. Between April 2020 and March 2021, we supported 572 applications, totalling more than £420,000.

We helped with the food bills for those placed on furlough, made redundant or who were self-employed; with moving costs for families if they had to very quickly leave dangerous and unhealthy relationships; and supported many individuals and families as they stepped out from a supported living scheme and into their own place to live.

If you were a recipient of a Longleigh Individual Grant, our sincere hope is that it made some positive difference to you, big or small, and that it just gave that bit of space to breathe, to regroup and then to go again.

Supporting communities

We also provided funding to charitable and social enterprise organisations for them to deliver vital projects.

We continued to fund a charity that provides beds for children that don't have one and for two refuges for people fleeing abusive relationships. We also continued to fund a project that exclusively supports Stonewater residents with becoming more confident with digital technology.

We also funded three community organisations to provide easy-to-access and longer-term support, exclusively for Stonewater residents, to help with improving economic and emotional wellbeing.

What's next for us?

As we look forward, we're going to continue funding this work because we know the longer-term impact of the pandemic is far from being over.

We're a very small team at Longleigh but we're dedicated to using our funding to help Stonewater customers and communities as much as we can. 2020-21 was an incredibly difficult year and we know that the impact of the pandemic is still being felt. We are committed to being here for you when times are hard and if you need us, we'll do what we can to help.

Best wishes

Andy Peers

Chief Executive, Longleigh Foundation

Dealing with anti-social behaviour

Anti-social behaviour (ASB) can be one of the biggest causes of stress and anxiety for our customers.

While the vast majority of the communities we serve are peaceful and friendly places, a small number of disruptive people can cause huge problems for so many, and we've worked hard to support customers who were experiencing it during lockdown.

In 2020-21, we asked our Scrutiny Panel to review how we handle ASB noise complaints to find out what you think of our approach and make some recommendations about how we can improve this element of our service.

The work of our Scrutiny Panel sparked a wider review of our approach to ASB, where we spoke to customers about how we handle ASB.

Having listened to your feedback, you told us we can:

- Be better at communicating with you during various stages of your case
- Be clearer about what you can expect from us and the likely outcomes of an ASB case
- Have a more accessible and user-friendly ASB procedure for you
- Get you involved in testing tools to support you such as noise-monitoring apps
- Develop ways to help you manage and resolve ASB yourself

With our new, specialist team in place for anti-social behaviour, we are shaking up how we handle cases and creating a more flexible service that suits you and is much more focussed on resolutions.

Case study: Support for cuckooing victim

When Stonewater customer Joan (not her real name), 60, had her property taken over by two drug dealers, we worked with the police to put it right.

Police raised concerns about Joan's home being used by other people, and when inspections from our team and social services found drug paraphernalia, it was clear she had become a victim of cuckooing – when someone's home is taken over and used by someone else for illegal activities.

We worked together with police and social services to first get Joan to safety, and then to make sure the people who had taken over her home were arrested and given an exclusion order, preventing them from going near her or her property.

Joan successfully returned home and our team continue to support her.

Tracey, from Stonewater's ASB team, said: "This was a good result to safeguard the customer, her money, and to prevent the illegal use of her home. I really couldn't have got this result without our fantastic working relationship with the police."

"I was quite distressed during the call, but the staff member was very reassuring. He put me at ease, taking the time to listen and make sure he had taken down my issue properly."

Tracie, Stonewater customer

A more flexible approach to letting homes

Regardless of Covid, lockdowns and national restrictions, people still needed to be able to move home in 2020-21.

The pandemic, together with our move to a national approach to our business, challenged our lettings service to become more flexible than ever before.

Reacting quickly

With teams working remotely, we made more use of technology to help us overcome the challenges of social distancing with around 83% of sign-ups completed virtually and implementing more e-forms to get contracts signed.

The success of virtual sign-ups has also helped the team to embed the new national approach, with viewings and inspections now completed at times which are more suitable for our customers, and not just when one of the team travel.

Better partnerships

What's more, our teams now have greater focus on specific areas to get things done much faster. We now have colleagues dedicated to working with local authorities to enable greater partnership working and support local initiatives.

We also have a much clearer perspective on empty homes, meaning that we know when and where we have homes available.

This has helped us reduce the amount of time it takes us to re-let homes to around 21 days, down from 29 in the previous year, and helps us support other areas of the business where customers come to us in desperate need.

Listening to you

We've also been listening to you about your experiences of moving into one of our properties and working hard to make the moving in process easier for you.

Based on your feedback, we're making things clearer around what to expect when customers move in to our homes as well as looking at areas where customers are finding the most frustration. Boiler services, for example, now happen when properties are empty so that we can find and fix any faults before you move in.

"Everything was straight forward, the lady that signed me up, Alison, was really friendly and made everything really simple for us. I'm very happy with my new home and service from Stonewater. Thank you"

Michelle, Stonewater customer

Our new neighbourhoods service

2020-21 saw us make some big changes to the way we support your community.

We've restructured lots our services to create more specialist teams that can dedicate more time to specific issues, creating a more consistent service for you, no matter where you live.

Our new teams can focus on resolving issues like noise complaints, domestic abuse, waste and fly-tipping, anti-social behaviour, boundary queries, grass cutting services and more, rather than having one person try to tackle all of these.

Lots of the people you used to deal with have been placed into these new teams to retain the valuable information and experience they've built up over the years, sharing it with the rest of the business so that we can help you wherever you are.

Working remotely has meant we can help more customers everyday, as our staff are spending less time travelling to meetings and visits in different areas. We've had some great success resolving issues on the phone and in video meetings, meaning we can be more flexible and book appointments at times that suit you.

Case study: How we helped five households to meet in the middle with virtual support

When five customers, each with a history of disputes against each other, logged new complaints, our Neighbourhoods Team decided a new approach to helping them was needed.

With fresh allegations of using each other's parking spaces, inconsiderate use of the communal gardens and disruptive behaviour, our team began trying to get to the bottom of the situation.

Using virtual meetings, each customer was interviewed separately and confidentially to find out what had been happening, carefully recording everyone's individual account.

Each customer was able to give us a virtual walk around where they live, pointing out the issues they were experiencing and allowing us to understand more about where their frustrations were coming from.

Following these meetings, our team was able to create a "good neighbour agreement" for each of the five neighbours to follow to prevent more friction between them.

The agreement set out the positive behaviours that everyone had said they would like to see in order to help them all get along better. With everyone accepting their part to play, there has been no more complaints of disruptive behaviours from any of the five customers.

The virtual approach to this case allowed us to be much faster, more discreet and more accommodating to the customers involved as meetings were scheduled at times and days which suited them and not just when our team were available.

"The staff member was a great help. Every time I phoned about this problem the customer service centre were very helpful and understanding. I'm very grateful."

Susan, Stonewater customer

Retirement living: **Shifting the focus**

For the people living in our retirement living schemes across the country, the threat posed by Covid-19 made many customers feel anxious about keeping safe.

As the pandemic developed, our teams had to react quickly and make decisions to keep our colleagues and customers safe, minimising the spread of the virus. Instinctively, we were carrying out our work remotely where we could, we reduced visits to our retirement living homes and we locked down communal areas to try and prevent the spread of infection.

Visits were still happening and we reached out further by telephone to those customers who we knew needed a voice to speak to in an effort to tackle feelings of loneliness and isolation - another side-effect of Covid.

A lot of our decisions had to be made quickly and we know that we didn't always get the best information to you at the right time.

As a result of this feedback, our Retirement Living team has been busy having more conversations with our customers and finding out what's most important to them. This is helping us to build a new, more interactive service which gives customers more opportunities to play a bigger role in their communities through volunteering and other projects.

As we've started to bring back more of our team back into our retirement living spaces, the focus has shifted away from thinking about what barriers our customers are faced with, and more about what they can do to make their community a better place to live.

"Everyone gets on with everybody, it's really nice. I feel as though I've lived here forever."

Brenda, Retirement Living customer

Supported Living: Helping people when they need us the most

For many, lockdown meant spending weeks and months indoors where we were shut off from friends, family and the things that we love to do.

With parks, offices, gyms, shops, places of worship, event venues and other public spaces all closed, thousands of people suddenly lost vital support groups, safe spaces, access to healthcare and facilities which they depend on just to survive.

Knowing these challenges, our Supported Living Team found new ways to support people with specialist needs during lockdown. Not only did we do our best to continue to offer the same personal service as before to ensure that those that needed help found a familiar, friendly face, but we also expanded to support more people in crisis.

Rough-sleepers, Dorset

For people sleeping rough in 2020-21, the reality of the pandemic left them cut off from vital support services and fighting for survival.

Having supported homelessness projects in Dorset through the first lockdown, the council reached out to us and the YMCA Youth Hostel Association for more help when the second wave hit.

Between November 2020 and April 2021, we worked with 14 people to provide shelter and access to housing support so that they weren't alone and on the streets during a long, cold winter.

From a hostel in Swanage, the group were given the time and space to find more stable accommodation or to get more support for their needs.

Safety for domestic abuse survivors

Supporting people fleeing domestic violence became a lot harder during lockdown, but with our team receiving calls from people in need of support, we reacted quickly.

In March 2020, we launched our virtual refuge service within a week to support people needing to leave their homes and find safety.

We quickly identified some homes which we could use to re-house individuals and families who were at risk of violence in their homes.

A mixture of empty rooms, empty homes and refuges were used to offer safe spaces for domestic abuse survivors. Our team secured £60,000 of funding to help furnish and decorate the properties as well as providing money for travelling costs, toys for children and additional support staff.

The families we supported have all moved on to permanent homes.

"The Stonewater team has been there for me whenever I needed them. I know how much they care about each and every one of us."

Safe Space customer.

The virtual refuge project won a Homeless Link Excellence Award in December 2020.

Measuring our social impact

Many of the activities, schemes and projects in our communities were impacted by the pandemic in 2020-21.

We had to find new ways to keep them going while keeping everyone safe. With fewer visits to our communities, it wasn't as easy for us to spot people who needed our help.

But we were determined to help and find ways to keep people connected to support that can make a real difference in their lives. Here's a quick look at some of the ways we reached out during 2020-21:

Retirement Living

We created safe ways to keep up the coffee mornings, gardening clubs, wellbeing calls, digital inclusion sessions and more to help our older customers.

Brenda, from Norfolk House, said: "The staff were very good, they rang you up every morning to see if you wanted any help. We had a laugh and a joke. Really brilliant they were."

We Are Digital

This year we helped 95 people become more digitally savvy; particularly handy during lockdown where meeting virtually was the only way to stay in touch.

Single mum Valerie, who needed to brush up on her digital skills to boost her career prospects, said: "I would definitely recommend this training, I've found it to be really helpful in furthering my career. I hadn't done any computer training for a long time but this was a breath of fresh air."

Rough Sleepers to Secure Housing

We helped 57 people to get off the streets and into stable, secure homes in 2020-21 so that they could start to rebuild their lives.

Funding and support

As well as supporting customers through our own community investment scheme, we worked with support agencies such as the Longleigh Foundation and Clean Slate to help customers meet unexpected costs and get some expert advice to help them out of a financial tight spot.

"Stonewater gave me a cash payment in my bank to help me with essential items for my journey to begin, I am so thankful." - SK, Stonewater customer.

Veterans self-build

We helped nine UK military veterans get their lives back on track and learn new skills by getting them involved in building their own houses. Having found life difficult after their military careers, our veterans have been able to gain valuable experience and put a roof over their own head with the support of our team and our contractors.

"I found a sense of belonging and purpose. Everyday we were learning something new. Initially we were just going to be working on the houses but we ended up cleaning up the community garden. It's not just your own house you're building. You get to be a part of something bigger."

Gavin Owens.

Through these projects, our customers told us they felt they had:

- Better access to the internet
- Better employment opportunities
- Higher confidence
- Better access to specialist advice
- Relief from anxiety and depression
- More control over their lives
- Better access to housing support

Estates: Looking after your community

Lockdown has made us all more aware of our surroundings where we live, especially as we've all been spending more time at home since 2020.

It's only natural then that we are noticing where improvements can be made.

Many of our customers have contacted us about our estate services. Your feedback told us that the services you received were often inconsistent, both in terms of when they would be on site and what they would do while there. It's this feedback that is helping us to improve.

During the pandemic, the focus for our contractors went on health and safety, keeping things like door handles, handrails and light switches clean to prevent the spread of infection where we could. This meant that we had less time on other areas that you told us were important to you.

We know that you want better communication and clearer information about what you can expect in return for your service charges.

We're putting plans in place to let you know when work will be done, and to make sure that everyone gets a more consistent service, wherever they live.

Case study: Coping with Covid: Spotlight on grounds maintenance partner Just Ask

Since 2019, Just Ask has delivered cleaning, grounds, and waste services to Stonewater across the South of England.

Just Ask ensured its workforce maintained a safe and consistent service across all our contracts during the pandemic.

The team had extra training to help them focus on preventing the spread of the virus, with extra efforts going into sanitising surfaces in communal areas which were likely to be touched by lots of people. Weekly calls helped them to stay up to date with the latest developments and guidance around Covid, keeping Stonewater in the loop with how changes could affect customers.

Just Ask also assembled its specialist 24/7 Rapid Response team who were able to carry out urgent cleaning and decontamination works following outbreaks. With specialist equipment, they were able to cover large areas quickly to keep everyone safe.

As well as providing support for helping us to cope with Covid, Just Ask also helped us to make a real difference to customers in our retirement living communities in 2020-21.

In addition to the extra cleaning and sanitation work to protect our older customers, Just Ask gave us some extra time to improve communal areas by building planters and greenhouses for gardens, and even putting TV screens on the walls to allow customers to host film nights.

“The communal cleaning inside the block is absolutely fantastic and everyone really appreciates the hard work put in for the residents. The best cleaners we’ve ever had!” – Delia, Stonewater customer.

“They are polite and very helpful. Ten out of ten well done.”

David, Stonewater customer

Repairs: Putting your safety first

Arguably the biggest challenge to our business during the pandemic was making sure we could still carry out your repairs without putting any of our customers, our staff or our partners in danger.

Apart from the risk of spreading infection, there were also supply chain issues with sourcing parts, materials and PPE as well as significant Covid outbreaks within our contractors' businesses. This slowed everything down for us and saw us deal with a lot more complaints in the past year as we had to extend our 28-day standard.

The decision to offer emergency repairs only was a difficult one for us and one which we knew wouldn't be popular but it was necessary to keep people safe.

Having established safe working practices, we were able to carry out some of our planned programme works, trying hard to respect our customers' views and checking with them whether they were happy for work to happen in their home.

Despite these setbacks, we have hit some of our most important targets. For example, 99.95% of our homes are gas safe and we completed 99.2% of our repairs having switched to an emergency only service.

We've also secured three new 15-year contracts with our repairs partners in 2020-21, helping us to build long-lasting relationships and scrutinise performance even further to make sure we keep improving this service for you.

Our Scrutiny Panel launched an in-depth review into our repairs service to see how, from a customer point of view, this could be better for you.

We owe a huge thank you to our customers who have been patient with our repairs service during this time as we have adapted to the ever-changing situation. We're determined to have a great repairs service to help you feel safe in your home and we will keep listening to your feedback to help us improve it.

"It was on time and the contractor worked with confidence and left nothing to clear up behind him. Thank You."

Vera, Stonewater customer

Watching our carbon footprint

We as a business are well aware of the impact we have on the environment.

Whether it's building and maintaining homes, visiting schemes, attending events or printing materials to share information, we know the world's resources are finite and our environment is in a delicate balance.

We are committed to reducing our carbon footprint and finding more ways to work sustainably which can not only reduce the impact we have on the environment, but can also help save money which can be reinvested into improving services for our customers.

Here's a quick round up of some of our sustainability projects we've been involved in during 2020-21:

Big Energy Saving Week

In January 2021 we supported Big Energy Saving Week and spoke to around 25,000 customers about things they can do save money on their energy bills and tips and advice on using energy more efficiently.

New homes; new trees

In 2018, we partnered with the Community Forest Trust and committed to planting a new tree for every house we build as well as donating £50 to the trust which they use to plant even more trees and help communities connect with nature.

With the average house using about five and a half trees worth of timber to build, this scheme helps us to offset the resources we use while also helping to tackle the housing crisis.

In 2020-21, we built 671 new homes, meaning that we helped to replace around 4,000 trees last year - taking our total to more than 12,000 since the scheme began.

Setting high standards

We submit our performance data every year to SHIFT and we were pleased to achieve the silver standard in 2020-21; next year we'll be going for gold.

In July 2020, we commissioned a report with the Institute for Public Policy Research which revealed that around 12 million homes in England need more support to meet net zero targets by 2050 and tackle fuel poverty.

As part of this work, we're committed to playing a part in projects that find cleaner, more efficient energy for our homes. In 2020-21 we fitted around 125 low carbon heating systems (heat pumps) into our homes, taking our total to over 1,000 in our stock.

Partnership working

We are working closely with all our supply chain to make sure that sustainability and environmental best practice is a priority.

We ask for quarterly reports from our contractors about their sustainability efforts, and hosted a conference for all our suppliers to come together to share their ideas on driving down our impact on the environment.

From the ground up

The partnership project that's providing new low-carbon heat pumps for homes in Oxford

People all over the UK are experiencing higher energy bills, with many households spending more time at home and finding it harder to keep warm during the colder months.

As an alternative to traditional heating systems, heat pumps are becoming more and more common across the world thanks to their low-carbon, high power outputs and installing them in our homes is one way we're doing our bit to decarbonise the nation's homes and make energy bills smaller.

As a part of the Energy Superhub Oxford (ESO) project, we're installing ground source heat pumps into 60 homes at our scheme in Blackbird Leys. Once installed, the heat pumps will help to provide cleaner, smarter and more affordable energy to customers, driving down their bills and putting less strain on the planet.

“Delighted with the results”

Stuart Gadsen, Director of Sales - South East, Kensa Contracting, said: “As soon as Innovate UK funding was confirmed for ESO, we immediately approached Stonewater to ask them to participate in this exciting project. Kensa and Stonewater have worked in partnership for a number of years and we knew that the existing relationship between the two organisations would help the project progress smoothly.

“The ground source heat pumps are now installed and householders are delighted with the results. Stonewater is one of our key partners and we've already started to discuss another innovative ground source heat pump project with them for next year.”

Innovation is helping to tackle fuel poverty

Adam Masters, Environmental Sustainability Manager at Stonewater, said: “We hope that our participation in the Energy Superhub Oxford project will allow us to show how innovation can deliver cleaner, affordable energy solutions for our customers. We are looking forward to exploring future opportunities to innovate using heat pumps which will lower carbon emissions for our homes and help to tackle fuel poverty for our customers.”

Stonewater has around 1,000 heat pumps installed in properties across the UK, and with projects like this we hope to add around 300 in the next year.

Where our money comes from

£154m
Rental income

£19.7m
Service charges

£7m
Gouvernement grants

£7m
Other income

Where our money goes



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