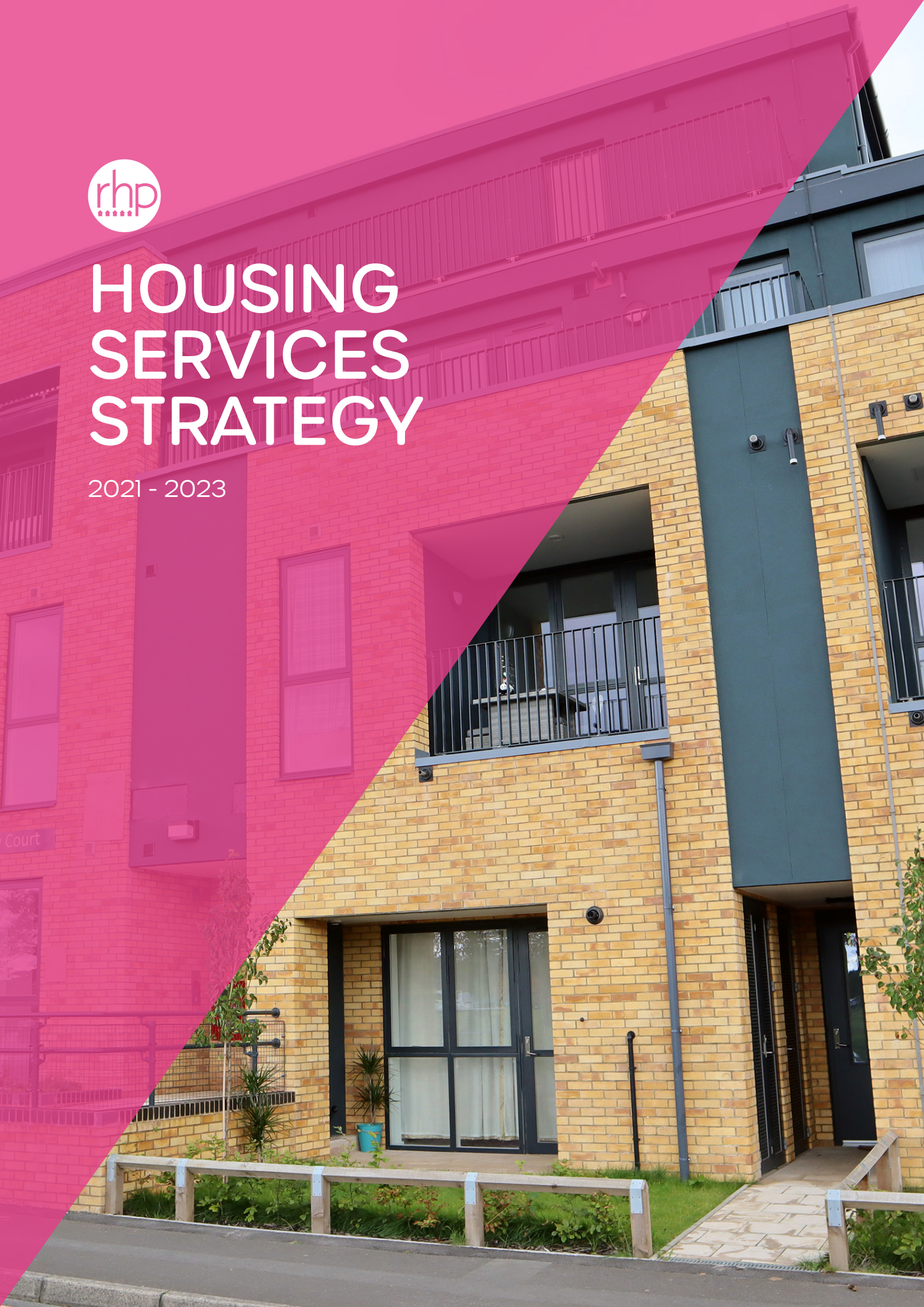




# HOUSING SERVICES STRATEGY

2021 - 2023



## INTRODUCTION: WHERE WE ARE NOW



**ROBERT DOBBS**

**DIRECTOR OF  
HOUSING SERVICES**

The Covid-19 pandemic and the impact lockdown has had on both individual households and communities highlights the need to have a housing services strategy that is focussed on continuing to deliver core services well whilst ensuring that our most vulnerable customers are supported and can access services from RHP and other organisations.

This strategy has been written at a time that allows us to reflect on our response and positive action taken since lockdown to ensure that we have supported older and more vulnerable customers. In addition, it is a credit to our teams that we have consistently delivered housing and estate services particularly tackling anti-social behaviour, delivering caretaking on our estates and maintaining welfare contact with customers in retirement housing. Clearly, there is much more that has also been delivered and a summary of key achievements and activities are set out within the strategy. These are included not only to recognise what has been delivered but to also give context to the key actions over the next two years.

In producing this strategy, we have taken into account the strategic aims set out within Richmond Council's draft Housing and Homelessness Strategy issued in November 2020, as well as the themes of the Social Housing White Paper. It is positive that the Council's strategy sets out the partnership work with RHP: to build homes, make the best use of the limited housing available and the joint working to support the most vulnerable in our communities.

We now operate and deliver housing services across four London boroughs (Richmond; Hounslow; Kingston upon Thames and Hillingdon) and much of what we do applies across all geographic areas and not just related to Richmond. In 2021 we will start to take on housing and estate management services for homes owned by LGAH. The location of these homes will be across London and will create logistical issues in terms of service delivery.

The Covid-19 pandemic brought its own challenges and the best in RHP in terms of our swift response to ensure there was minimal service change to customers (where allowed) and the way we focussed on supporting those most in need. We have moved quickly to new ways of working and as a service have embraced the change to remote working whilst minimising the disruption in service delivery to customers. We are proud of what we have delivered and the way we have responded as a service to the pandemic. We will not return to old ways of working and where we can, we will use technology and innovative ways to deliver services going forward. We were the first organisation to introduce e-tenancy agreements and this year followed a similar approach for mutual exchanges. The pandemic has highlighted issues with keeping in contact with customers living in retirement housing and we will explore the introduction of assisted technology to support independent living and lifestyle choices.

Our focus is on three themes:

1. Ensuring our most vulnerable and elderly customers can access RHP services.
2. Consistently deliver core services well to our tenants, leaseholders and shared ownership customers.
3. Looking after our customers and employees and keeping them safe.



The housing services strategy is set out under 5 priority areas that are aligned to RHPs strategic objective of being a leading provider of housing services that deliver exceptional customer experience. These are:



1. Making the best use of our housing stock.



2. Building strong communities; through the provision of good quality homes and safe places to live.



3. Protecting our most vulnerable customers and ensure they can access services from RHP and care and support organisations.



4. Ensuring all customers can 'Connect with' RHP in ways that are convenient for them and have the opportunity to get involved in shaping services and giving feedback.



5. Delivering a dedicated management service for leasehold and shared ownership customers.

The above priorities address the themes set out in the Social Housing White Paper as they relate to housing management and tenant empowerment and our response to the key elements are set out within the strategy.

Robert Dobbs

Director of Housing Services

March 2021

# PRIORITY ONE: MAKING THE BEST USE OF OUR HOUSING STOCK

## CONTEXT

RHP owns and manages 9,207 homes across four London boroughs. There are also a small number of homes we manage on behalf of others or we manage on their behalf. Most tenanted homes are either secure lifetime tenancies or let for a five-year fixed term. We also have a small portfolio of keyworker tenancies to house those in essential support services who otherwise would find it difficult to secure rented accommodation.

We relet in the region of 350 homes per year and around 270 through nomination agreements with the relevant local authority. This means that only 25% are available to directly house RHP tenants and these are offered to those in the highest housing need. It is therefore crucial that we make the best use of our limited supply by addressing under occupation, sub-letting and tenancy fraud. Our development programme will see 155 homes built over the next 2 years, including the redevelopment of a 24-home retirement scheme at Sommerville House, Whitton.



## WHERE WE ARE NOW

### Letting Homes

In 2019-20 we let 344 homes and in 2020-21 we expect to let around 250 homes. The majority of homes let are one bed flats to single households. Family size accommodation is in short supply and for the larger homes we only had 53 x 3 bed and 5 x 4 bed homes last year. Of the homes available, 25% potentially are allocated to customers on RHP's own transfer list and the majority of these will be offered to customers on our priority need list, which includes those with severe mobility issues, significant health concerns or as a result of being the victims of violence or other crimes that places them or their household at risk.

We support the Mayor of London Housing Moves scheme and the Pan London Housing Reciprocal scheme where households are fleeing violence. We have also supported initiatives from Richmond Council to house rough sleepers at risk from the Covid-19 pandemic.

We let 91 homes to customers employed in essential services known as keyworkers. These homes are let at a higher rent on a tenancy that is secure as long as they stay employed in the keyworker job. We will review this scheme to recognise that many of the keyworkers we house are employed in key roles within the NHS and have been RHP tenants for over 10 years and have maintained their tenancies. We will look to grant greater security of tenure for those keyworkers who meet an agreed criteria.

All new tenancies are let on a five-year fixed term tenancy and have been since affordable rent tenancies were introduced. All RHPi tenancies introduced in 2016 are also let for a five-year fixed term. Now that many are coming up for renewal, we are finding that customers are not engaging in the process to grant a new tenancy and it is administratively heavy to process these. The opportunity to end the tenancy after five years is no easier than for other tenancy types. We will review how fixed term tenancies operate going forward particularly focussing on the length of tenancy granted.



### Retirement housing

We will review how and who we allocate retirement housing to as we are finding some of the schemes with shared bathing are not popular and these remain empty for long periods. Ideally, we will convert these into self-contained homes with their own bathing facilities or redevelop the scheme. However, in the interim we will continue to explore how to make the best use of these unpopular homes.

Retirement housing is not a popular choice for many households and the fact that those over the age of 55 (many of whom are working) are offered it shows that it is not specifically for an older retired customer group. We will look at options for housing younger people with support needs in schemes where this could be an attractive proposition to help them live independently.

As part of a wider strategic review we will also look at the future of our retirement schemes and continue to explore options for disposal or redevelopment where this is right. Ideally, we want a smaller portfolio of schemes in desirable locations, that provide a great environment and support independent living. The redevelopment of Sommerville House to be complete in 2021 is an example of this.

### Housing Management

We continue to work with the South West London Fraud Partnership (SWLFP) to identify and take action to recover homes let through tenancy fraud. Over the last two years we have recovered 16 homes through sub-letting that have in turn been offered to households on the Council's waiting list. In addition, we have prevented seven Right to Buy applications as a result of fraud checking. We will continue to use a partnership approach to ensure that homes are occupied by the tenant and take action where they are not.

For most customers their best option for moving homes is through a mutual exchange. Over the last two years, we have assisted 78 households to swap and move to a new home of their own choice, with a further 33 in progress. We will continue to explore how we can make this easier, safer and at a lower cost to both tenants and RHP. The introduction this year of electronic documents to sign to replace paper copies is one way we have made the administration easier and quicker and Covid-19 safe!





## PRIORITY ONE: ACTION PLAN

- ✓ Reduce the time it takes to re-let homes to under 35 days (new developments and existing) and to also reduce the time residents spend in temporary accommodation.
- ✓ As part of the website development, introduce a new Home Search facility to enable RHP customers to view and bid for vacant homes and to self-manage their own housing application with us. As part of this support downsizing through using the Home search system.
- ✓ Carry out a review of how and who we allocate to retirement housing exploring housing younger people with learning or physical disabilities and increase the age criteria from 55 to 67.
- ✓ Review the use of fixed term tenancies and explore the option to offer 10-year fixed term tenancies on renewal or for all new fixed term tenants.
- ✓ Ensure the new retirement scheme Sommerville House is let with minimal rent loss.
- ✓ Carry out a review of keyworker tenancies and the dedicated keyworker schemes. Consider replacing keyworker tenancies for all tenants who have held and maintained tenancy conditions for 5 years, with a fixed term 10 year tenancy at an affordable rent.
- ✓ Agree a retirement housing strategy strategy to regenerate retirement housing schemes that require modernising or significant investment and replace those with shared bathing.
- ✓ Support local authority initiatives to provide permanent housing for rough sleepers and other vulnerable groups.
- ✓ Help reduce fuel poverty through securing reduced utility costs for new tenants and Project 2030!

## **PRIORITY TWO: BUILD STRONG COMMUNITIES; THROUGH THE PROVISION OF GOOD QUALITY HOMES AND SAFE PLACES TO LIVE**

### **CONTEXT**

The increase and media attention in incidents of crime across London is not unique to inner city areas and some RHP estates have seen an increase in serious crime and anti-social behaviour including: drug related activity; hate crime; domestic abuse; cuckooing; gang activity, assault and murder. The pandemic has seen an increase in reports of domestic abuse, and we continue to support victims to remain safely in their home or move to a place of safety.

Over the last two years we have seen a significant increase in groups of young people causing disturbances and damage on estates. This is a growing area of concern for RHP and we have seen an increase in recent years of drug activity, serious assault and murder, gangs of youths on estates and an increase in cuckooing where vulnerable adults homes have been taken over for criminal activity.

Our estates remain great places to live although we recognise that there is more that can be done in partnership to continue to build strong communities.

We have taken positive action to prevent ASB continuing including obtaining injunctions and evicting perpetrators as well as working with the police to secure closure orders for a number of properties where criminal activity has taken place. We are a lead partner for the Council in its committees and groups focussed on tackling anti-social behaviour and providing support to the most vulnerable in the community. We will continue to be an active partner in the Community Safety Partnership; CMARAC; MARAC, IOM and the VAMA.

The desire to improve communities and neighbourhoods is reflected in the Social Housing White Paper and our action plan strengthens our approach in this area particularly responding to anti-social behaviour.

### **WHERE WE ARE NOW:**

#### **Estate Services**

Our caretaking team have been ever present throughout lockdown ensuring that blocks of flats are free of hazards and estates are kept clean and clear. There is an opportunity to deliver a more responsive and agile service that will replace the majority of remote working fixed site teams with a mobile service working in small groups to respond quickly to issues that arise and enhance the local area through small improvement projects. A new management structure for the service will give both greater reach and visibility to customers and also a stronger grip on operational performance of estate services.

#### **Housing Management**

We have seen an increase in crime and serious anti-social behaviour on our estates and are aware of the impact that it has on individuals and the wider community. We investigate all reported cases and where the case workers have responded quickly, with either working with the police or employing private security companies to patrol estate where we have become aware of known hotspots for drug and other criminal activity and along with partnership working with local authorities and the Metropolitan Police, this has enabled us to take action to either prevent or stop serious crime. We provided a vacant flat to the police so they could carry out covert surveillance to tackle drug and gang related crime following a fatal shooting on one of our estates. We have supported the police to obtain three closure orders for drug use one of which was linked to cuckooing. We have dealt with 20 cases of cuckooing over the last two years and have been involved in supporting 3 murder investigations linked to this form of modern slavery.

Over the last 18 months we have been successful in every housing management case we have taken to court. We have obtained 12 possession orders for serious tenancy breaches and 15 ASB injunctions either as a permanent or interim solution to stop someone causing harm.



## PRIORITY TWO: ACTION PLAN

- ✓ Create a Caretaking Centre of Excellence, as a recruitment, training and development hub along with a further hub in Barnes.
- ✓ Modernise the caretaking service so that it moves to a mobile service with less lone working, more connected with customers, responsive to issues as they arise and has the capacity to improve the estate environment. Support community based environmental projects.
- ✓ Procure a new five-year grounds maintenance service from April 2023 using a detailed GIS survey of all of our communal land to ensure accurate tendering.
- ✓ Procure a new tree contract for RHP communal land from Spring 2021 and include a planting programme to support our green strategy.
- ✓ Implement recommendations from the Fire Safety Act and Building Safety Act as they relate to estate management when they become a legal requirement.
- ✓ Work with the London Fire Brigade to ensure our retirement schemes and high-rise blocks meet fire safety requirements.
- ✓ Communicate what we can and cannot do to tackle ASB through an updated policy and toolkit.
- ✓ Ensure that all tenant and leasehold front doors in blocks of flats will comply with fire safety standards.
- ✓ Strengthen approach to ASB management through earlier interventions in lower level nuisance and ASB. Follow industry leading practice in ASB management through training and ongoing professional development for our employees in this area.

## PRIORITY THREE: PROTECT OUR MOST VULNERABLE CUSTOMERS AND ENSURE THEY CAN REMAIN INDEPENDENT AND ACCESS SERVICES FROM RHP AND CARE AND SUPPORT ORGANISATIONS

### CONTEXT

We have 1074 customers over the age of 70 living in general needs housing and 75 of these over 90 with 3 who are 100+. Although many continue to lead an active and independent lifestyle there are a growing number who are reliant on the support or access to essential services including those from RHP. In addition, we support other adults who have learning or physical disabilities so that they can maintain independent living.

The majority of our work in this area is led by our customer support service who have extensive knowledge and experience of welfare benefits and other forms of support. The wider housing service has experience of working with vulnerable customers and either through reports of concern or personal contact will raise safeguarding alerts where customers are at risk of harm. Our retirement service provides homes and housing management support to over 400 customers, of which 225 are over 70 and 27 over 90.



### WHERE WE ARE NOW:

We responded quickly at the start of lockdown and personally contacted over 1000 older and vulnerable customers to check on their wellbeing and ensure that they could access services from RHP and other organisations including local authority community hubs.

We have a strong service model based on supporting our most vulnerable customers and last year we supported 133 vulnerable customers to sustain their tenancies through the work of our customer support service. This included assistance to maximise finances and acting as advocates at benefit/PIP meetings (including appeals) to ensure customers are claiming benefits that they are entitled to.

At the Travellers site in Hampton, we attend the site weekly to support this community to access local services and reduce isolation which increased during the lockdown. We have been awarded £2.6K funding for five customers to reduce fuel poverty from Hampton Fuel Allotment Charity.

We are a key partner at Richmond Council's MARAC and provide representation for victims of domestic abuse. We support customers affected or at risk of domestic abuse to access the Safety First Scheme to support them with installing security measures in their home to remain safe. Next year a key area is to strengthen our approach and work towards achieving DAHA accreditation.

We introduced a hardship fund of £20,000 for customers this year, to support those who were affected by Covid-19 (loss of employment/ furloughed). So far, we have assisted 20 customers with essential items/services that they cannot afford and no alternate funding could be found.

We take Safeguarding seriously and ensure our customer service teams are trained to identify and report abuse. As part of this commitment we undertake a safeguarding adults and children audit to ensure we are compliant.

The Winter Warmer Campaign is now in its third year and remains focussed on supporting customers aged 70 plus to stay connected with us and able to access services over the winter months. This includes ensuring they have applied for fuel poverty grants, there is hot water and heating in their homes, and they can continue to receive the right level of support to live independently. In previous years, we have worked in partnership with Waitrose Twickenham who donated food parcels to our most vulnerable older customers. With Covid-19 restrictions, the campaign will run remotely, and employee volunteers will be calling this group of customers to ensure they continue to remain safe during a challenging winter and support customers to access services. This will help to reduce isolation which was an emerging theme during the first lockdown. We will use the insight from the calls for service design to ensure we are responding positively to the needs of our older customers.

We donated £5K to the oneRichmond community fund to support community local business who are struggling financially due to Covid-19 or a reduction on funding. We work in partnership with local charities in the borough to support customers to apply for fuel poverty grants, essential white goods, and other essential items. We are a referral agency for local foodbanks across the borough and refer customers who are experiencing hardship in accessing essential food from the foodbanks.



We provide weekly drop-in sessions from local community hubs to support customers with access to online services and completing online application forms such as HB/council tax, benefit claims, homeswapper etc. Some customers use the hub to learn how to use digital devices to stay connected. Due to Covid-19, we have sadly closed the hubs temporarily to ensure the safety of employees and customers.

Through our development programme Section 106 requirements are in place, we ensure that we are recruiting local labour and providing residents from the local community opportunities to learn a new trade through the apprenticeship programme or gain a qualification (i.e. CSCS card). Due to Covid-19, we have changed our approach and offer online support to apprentices to ensure they can continue their learning safely. We have delivered DIY training for customers (basic tiling, plumbing) and created online videos for customers.





## PRIORITY THREE: ACTION PLAN

- ✓ Deliver the Winter Warmer campaign so that we continue to stay connected with some of our most vulnerable older customers.
- ✓ Introduce a Platinum90 service focussed on customers over 90 living alone to ensure they can access services, their homes are safe and allocate budget to provide white goods and other essential items to support independent living.
- ✓ Obtain Accreditation for the Domestic Abuse Housing Alliance (DAHA) to strengthen our approach to supporting victims of domestic abuse.
- ✓ Trial the use of assisted technology in retirement housing to support independent living.
- ✓ Continue to strengthen our work with customers living on the Travellers site ensuring it remains a strong community that keeps to the licence requirements.
- ✓ Support Richmond Council through being a key partner in a multi-agency approach to prevent homelessness for vulnerable groups.
- ✓ Continue to play an active role in promoting safeguarding children and adults and continue to be involved in Safeguarding Board sub-groups.

## PRIORITY FOUR: ENSURE ALL CUSTOMERS CAN 'CONNECT WITH' RHP IN WAYS THAT ARE CONVENIENT FOR THEM AND HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO GET INVOLVED IN SHAPING SERVICES AND GIVING FEEDBACK

### CONTEXT

Our Voice of the Customer (resident engagement) strategy is linked to our corporate strategy and specifically how we deliver a modern digitally enabled housing service with a better customer experience at a lower cost. Through greater use of data and customer insight we aim to drive out wasted contact, deliver basic services brilliantly and improve the online and offline experience, particularly for those customers who do not want to use our digital services.

The key aims are to ensure we are:

- ▶ Relevant in the channels we ask for feedback ensuring all customer groups have an opportunity for a 'voice' and can get involved in scrutinising and shaping services in ways that are convenient to them whilst being efficient and effective.
- ▶ Focussed on measuring and acting on insight, satisfaction and performance in those areas that matter most to RHP and our customers.
- ▶ Compliant with the Regulatory Standards as they relate to involvement and empowerment.

Key to our success is how we respond and improve services as a result of receiving actionable insight from customers. Sharing feedback, learning and identifying the pain points for customers and often employees will enable us to improve the way we deliver services.

The government published the Social Housing White Paper on 17 November 20 which aims to deliver improvements in transparency and accountability of landlords. The paper sets out a Charter for tenants and the framework for new regulation relating to the consumer standards and a strengthened Housing Ombudsman to improve complaints handling and speed of response. The section below and action plan set out our response to these key strands of the white paper.

Key themes of the Social Housing White Paper are accountability of RPs to residents and listening to residents and treating them with respect. Areas that we need to ensure are addressed are:

- ▶ 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.
- ▶ To have complaints dealt with promptly and fairly, with access to a strong ombudsman who will give you swift and fair redress when needed.
- ▶ To be treated with respect, backed by a strong consumer regulator and improved consumer standards for tenants.
- ▶ To have the customer voice heard by your landlord, for example through regular meetings, scrutiny panels or being on its board.



**Where we are now:**

Our approach to customer engagement has evolved in recent years, there are three strands to the way we engage and obtain feedback from customers which are:

- ▶ The Customer Scrutiny Group made of tenants and leaseholders who have reviewed and provided feedback on our approach to dealing with anti-social behaviour and our repairs service.
- ▶ A facebook group called 'MyRHP' with a membership of over 400 customers who often provide in the moment feedback on service experience.
- ▶ Feedback through surveys on our three main service interactions: repairs, caretaking and contact with our customer success centre.

We regularly contact all tenants to ensure that they know how and when they can contact us, how they can raise a complaint or get involved in shaping services and finally, provide more information on the repairs that we do and those that are their responsibility.

We have a sector leading performance on complaints resolving them on average within 2 days and we have not had a case considered or upheld by the Housing Ombudsman for over two years. We have a good working arrangement with Richmond Council's Tenants Champion who acts as an advocate for customers and helps support resolution.

We have reviewed how we will meet the recommendations of the social housing white paper when they become law. We will review our approach to tenant engagement to ensure it meets the Regulator of Social Housing and tenant requirements.

**PRIORITY FOUR: ACTION PLAN**

- Review approach to tenant engagement to ensure it meets Regulator of Social Housing and tenant requirements. Introduce a new set of tenant satisfaction measures.
- Adopt the NHF Together with Tenants Charter with RHP specific amendments listed.
- Comply with the Housing Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code.
- Continue to review the learning from complaints so that we reduce the volume raised regarding the same types of issues.
- We will contact all tenants to ensure that they know how and when they can contact us, how they can raise a complaint or get involved in shaping services and finally, provide more information on the repairs that we do and those that are their responsibility.
- Use the customer insight from the Purpose Architecture programme to develop resident engagement.

## PRIORITY FIVE: DELIVER A DEDICATED MANAGEMENT SERVICE FOR LEASEHOLD AND SHARED OWNERSHIP CUSTOMERS

### CONTEXT:

We have around 2000 leaseholders and shared ownership customers. It is recognised that homeowners offer different management challenges to tenants and therefore require a team with specialised knowledge to provide decisions to complex enquiries from leaseholders and solicitors.

RHP leaseholders are made up 3 distinct groups:

- ▶ Residential leaseholders who often have a vested interest in where they live as well as where they have invested their money.
- ▶ Non-residential leaseholders whose main focus is both a capital and revenue return on their investment.
- ▶ Shared ownership leaseholders who use this as a step into homeownership and are a growing group for RHP.

The expectations of all three groups are similar, in as much that they expect consistent delivery of services, reasonable investment by RHP in maintaining the property to protect their future asset and service charges with value for money that provide the best level of service for the lowest cost.



### Where we are now:

A specialist homeowner team was established in March 2020 with the objectives of delivering a better service offering better value for money to both RHP and homeowners. Already the team have demonstrated significant improvements in key processes such as lease extensions; sales pack; re-sales and staircasing and in responding to enquiries from leaseholders and solicitors. Although based on relatively low numbers satisfaction with the service is over 90%.

The team has shifted RHPs approach to be proactive in planning rather than reacting and responding to issues as they arise. For example, offering lease extensions as an option rather than waiting for leaseholders to submit applications. An objective is to support homeowners to self-serve so that they can resolve more enquiries themselves through our website. Initial changes to the help and advice section of the website is supporting delivery of this objective and we will continue to develop it as the website improvements are rolled out.

In response to feedback about delays in getting replies to enquires a dedicated homeowner email address was set up enabling same day resolution.





## PRIORITY FIVE: ACTION PLAN

- ✓ Review the impact of leasehold and shared ownership reform. These include making it easier to enfranchise, changing the valuation method for lease extensions and promoting commonhold.
- ✓ Connect with customers through arranging estate visits and 'meet and greet' sessions to identify what matters most and fix it. Through this improve transactional services to achieve 80%+ satisfaction.
- ✓ Introduce a new shared ownership resales procedure.
- ✓ Promote lease extensions and staircasing for shared ownership homes.
- ✓ Continue to improve self-service options.
- ✓ Review our service charge accounting processes to reduce the number of queries and adjustments each year.



