



ASTER  
GROUP

# Customer annual report 2020 / 2021





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# Welcome to our **2020 / 2021** **customer** annual report

**Emma O'Shea,**  
Chief operating officer



I'm delighted to welcome you to our 2020/2021 customer annual report, especially given the year we have all just experienced.

It feels like a lifetime ago I opened last year's report talking of the 'unexpected challenges' we faced due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the impact this had on our customers and the services we provide. However, in a year again dominated by COVID-19, rather than dwelling on the impacts, this report reflects on and celebrates how we have found new and innovative ways of working, allowing us to continue providing the essential services to make sure our customers can enjoy and live in safe, well maintained homes and communities.

In this report you will hear how we have improved our communities through the neighbourhood enhancement work, invested in the maintenance and improvement of our customers' homes and continued to develop ways we can reduce our carbon footprint.

Under the Customer Voice section, you can read about our service recovery planning, where we asked our customers for their thoughts on prioritising work coming out of the first lockdown period. In fact, over the course of the year we have worked hard to make sure our customers could have their voice heard. We have been really pleased to see how many responded to consultations and over 3,750 customers shared their views on a range of issues from kitchen designs to our on-going response to the pandemic.

Thank you to everyone involved in providing feedback to us and to our amazing involved customers for the time and value they bring.

We have also been busy looking at how we can continue to improve our services to ensure our customers' experience is the best it can be. In 2020 we joined the Institute of Customer Services, which shows our commitment to create a people-centred customer experience where customers can access our services as easily as possible.

In fact, our commitment to improving this has become part of our planned approach and we're now on an exciting transformation journey. During the year we developed and launched the Future of Customer Experience Framework, which looks at ways we can continue to improve our customer offer.

The framework is supported by the following five principles:

**Customer Voice** – using customer feedback to help shape and design our services and improve delivery.

**Connected Customer** – making it easier to contact us, whilst expanding our digital self-service offer and organising our teams so we can better support our customers.

**Customer Focused Culture** – strengthening our culture of putting our customers at the heart of everything that we do.

**Proactive Customer Services** – working together with our partners we'll use data and technology to provide safe, well maintained homes and communities.

**Effective Customer Services** – modernising and simplifying the way we work so that we can deliver a quality service right first time that helps limit our environmental impact and improve efficiency.

The real value for me is how our customers can help us to design our services and play a key part of this transformation. Our commitment to this design approach will offer more, varied ways for customers to be involved, share their experiences, and genuinely influence the services they receive and the homes and communities they live in.

Lastly, I want to say thank you to our customers for their patience and understanding throughout the pandemic period. We realise that operating an emergency only service during lockdowns caused some frustration, however it was the right thing to do to help keep our colleagues and customers safe. We have achieved some fantastic things this year and I'm delighted to lead our teams into 2021/2022 as we look to work closer with our customers and truly transform our services.



# A customer view

## Denise Harper

Customer and Communities Network member (CCN)



I've been an Aster customer for eight years and involved with providing feedback to the business for the same amount of time.

What struck me from the outset, was Aster's compassion and willingness to help me. I'd separated from my husband and couldn't afford to stay in the rented home we shared together on my own. I didn't have much and needed a new home. When Aster got in touch, it was like a weight had been lifted off my shoulders.

Every member of staff I have encountered has been brilliant and so helpful. There have been some hiccups along the way, but what separates Aster from other housing associations is its transparency and willingness to accept when a mistake has been made by trying to right the situation. It will also use customer feedback to make changes which help improve the services customers receive.

I've seen first-hand how Aster has evolved over the years, putting in place new policies and procedures and making changes where necessary. This past year has been one like no other due to the pandemic, but I've been delighted to see how Aster has managed to continue to provide a good service throughout the lockdowns and as restrictions have eased.

Most notably, Aster has protected its staff and customers to the highest level, and I applaud them for that. It can't have been easy managing a workforce and dealing with customers remotely, but they did – and they did it well. I always felt informed and knew what to expect in terms of service levels.

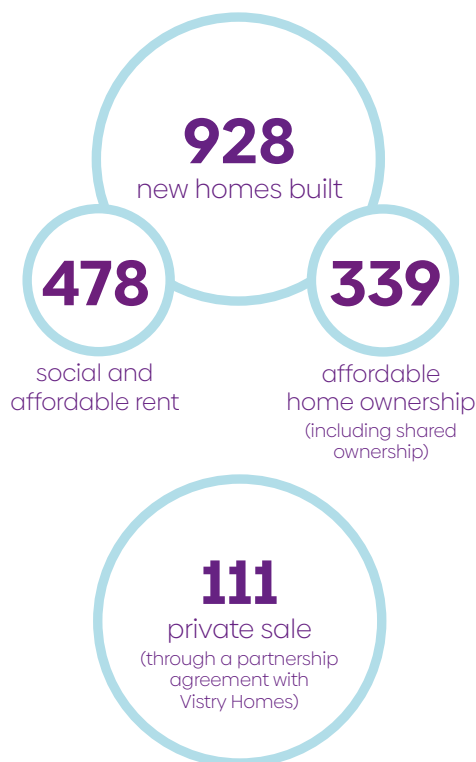
Our customer group meetings also had to adapt, going from face-to-face to online. In many ways it has proved to be a beneficial way to conduct our meetings as we've cut out travel time. While the world would have been a better place without COVID-19, it has in some ways been a trigger to bring forward improvements.

One of the projects I have been pleased to be involved with, is the development of MyAster, Aster's online self-service portal. As an IT professional, it sparked interest with me, and I was delighted to help with testing the portal before it went live. I've also made recommendations on how it could be improved further since its launch, and I'm excited to see it progress. Read on to find out more about Aster's plans for the portal later in this report!

Finally, I'd like to sign off by saying, the more customers who provide constructive feedback to Aster the better. The team can only change what isn't working if we tell them, so it's important that you use your voice to communicate the good and the bad - I can assure you, you will be listened to.



## Our homes



We own or manage over 32,000 homes across central, southern and south west England.

Our work with Community Land Trusts (CLTs) continues to go from strength to strength. We delivered 28 new homes for Chagford CLT this year in our first development within a National Park and received glowing feedback from the new residents.

CLTs are set up and run by people within the community to develop and manage affordable homes for local people. CLTs are responsible for ensuring that the homes remain genuinely affordable, not just for now, but for every future occupier.

Leanne Young, one of the new shared owners in Chagford said: "I'm really looking forward to living somewhere affordable that's close to my parents and the friends I grew up with."

"Previously as a private renting tenant, I moved seven times in seven years so it's going to be nice to have the long-term security of an affordable home."

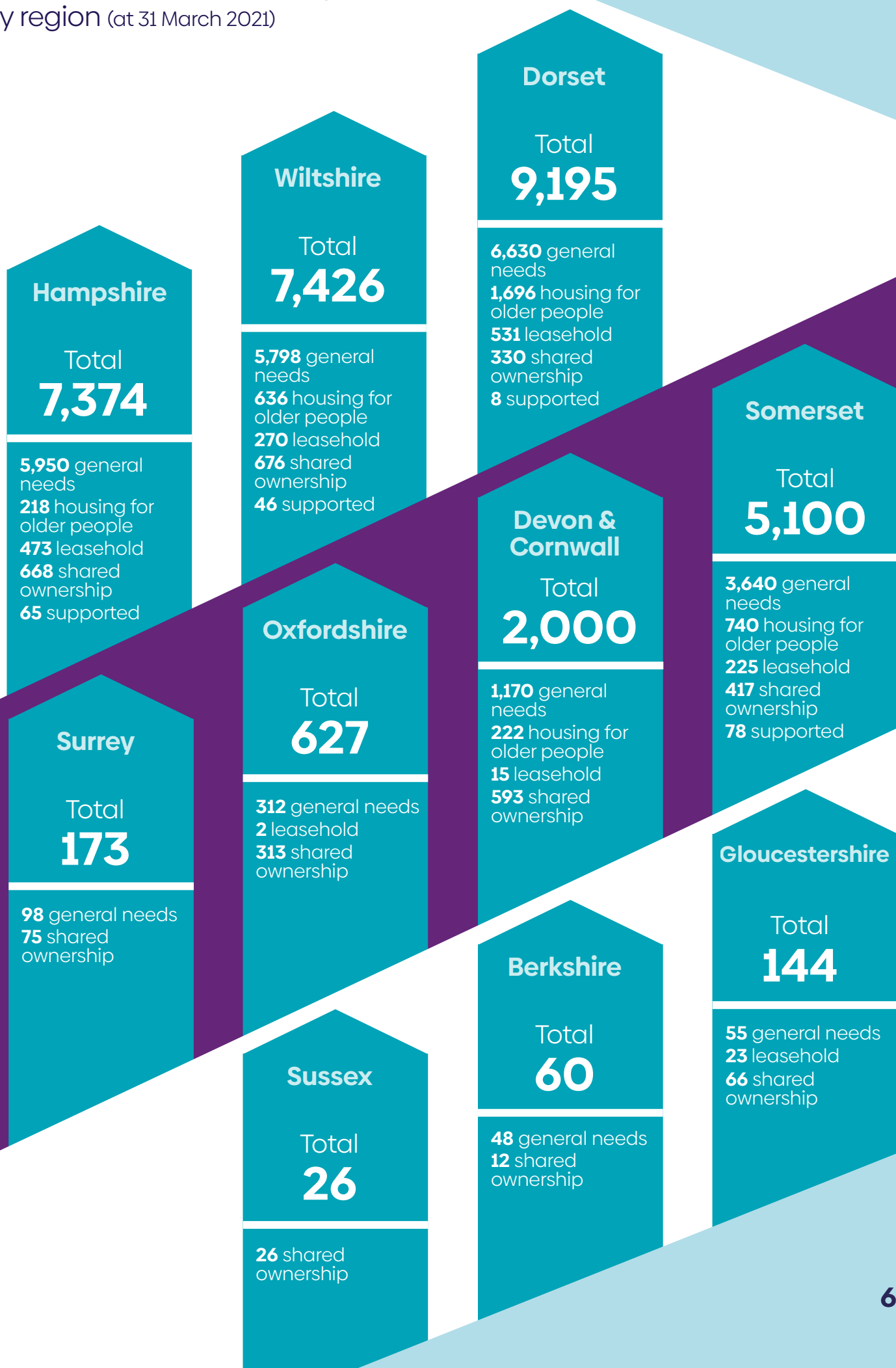
"In Chagford it's almost impossible to find properties that come with parking and a garden, and I will have both. As a keen gardener I'm looking forward to the spring when I'll be able to get out in my lovely garden."



**Leanne Young**



## Homes we own and manage by region (at 31 March 2021)



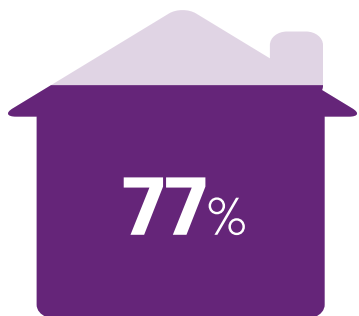
## Letting our homes



**existing homes re-let** in an average of **23.7** days



**new homes let** to customers in an average of **11.2** days



**of new customers** found the lettings process **easy**



**of customers are satisfied** the property meets their **needs**

We provide a range of affordable homes for rent for families, couples, single people and those aged 55 and above.

Customers for our homes are selected by the local council, usually through a choice-based lettings scheme where they 'bid' for homes that are available. If successful that's where we come in and aim to make the process of moving into one of our homes as simple as possible.

Though we were restricted in letting homes at certain times this year because of social distancing measures, we were able to switch to offering virtual viewings and digital sign-ups as soon as we could to ensure we could continue to help as many people as possible.

Our teams worked closely with new customers to understand their individual situations and the impact the pandemic was having on them personally and their need to move.

It's always our intention to re-let our homes to people who need them as quickly as possible, but we do need to take the time to ensure our homes meet the standards we expect, and our customers deserve. Occasionally there may be a delay and of course, this year there was an additional impact of COVID-19. It therefore isn't surprising that these disruptions impacted our normal lettings performance compared to previous years.

The amount of rent and service charges lost due to empty properties this year was £1,195,295 - 0.84% against our target of 0.76%.

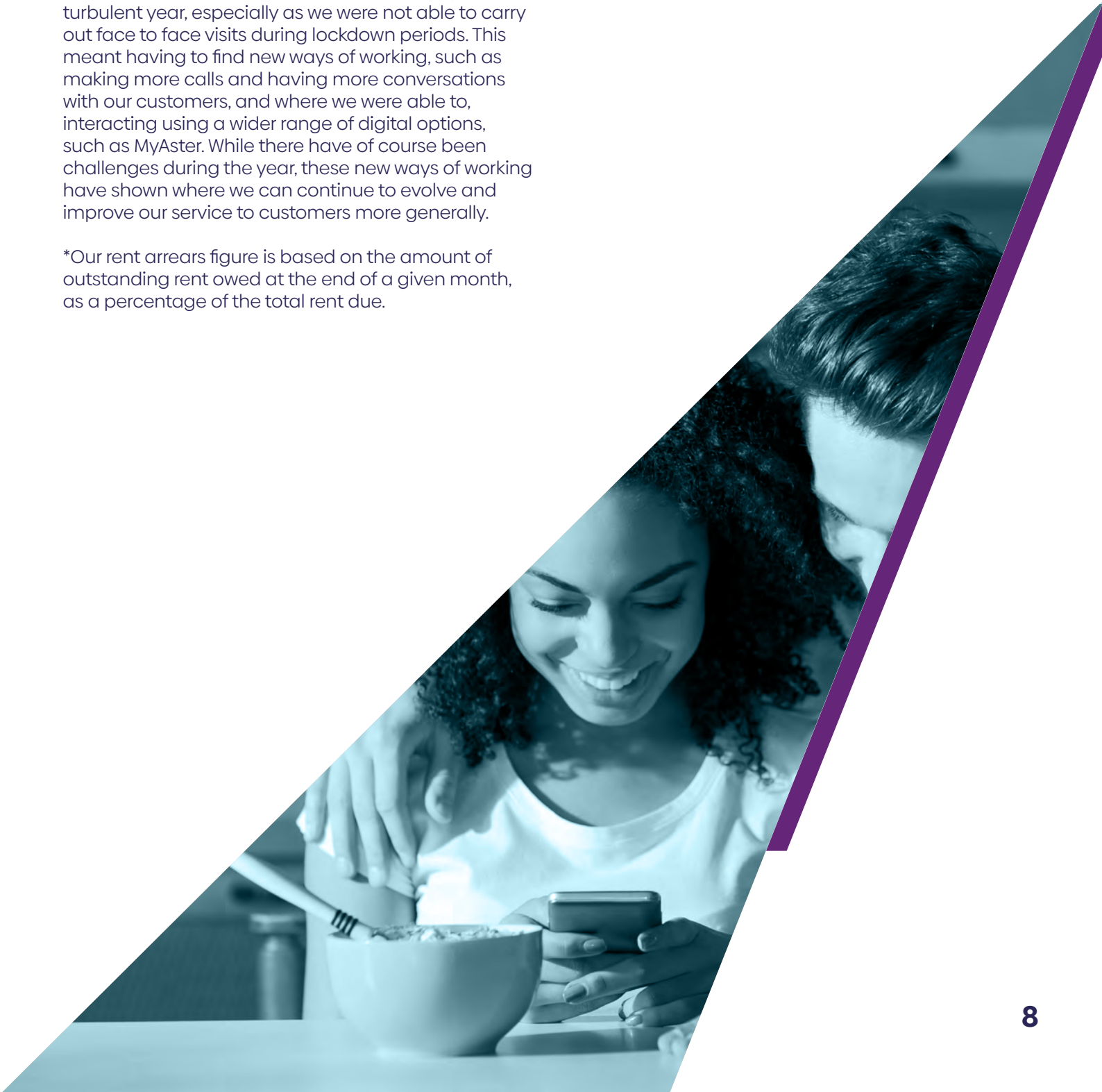
The feedback we received on our virtual viewings and digital sign-up process has been really positive, and we'll be keeping them as options moving forward.

## Customer accounts

Over the past year our teams have continued to make sure we're supporting our customers to pay their rent and other charges whilst protecting the business in a challenging time. Many people experienced difficult circumstances adjusting to an ever-changing world around us brought about by COVID-19 and an uncertain economic climate. We worked closely with our Financial Wellbeing colleagues and together planned how we could best help to make sure customers received the advice and support needed to pay their rent and charges.

At the end of the year, our rent arrears performance was at 2.02%\* against a target of 3%. This was a huge achievement for us and our customers during a very turbulent year, especially as we were not able to carry out face to face visits during lockdown periods. This meant having to find new ways of working, such as making more calls and having more conversations with our customers, and where we were able to, interacting using a wider range of digital options, such as MyAster. While there have of course been challenges during the year, these new ways of working have shown where we can continue to evolve and improve our service to customers more generally.

\*Our rent arrears figure is based on the amount of outstanding rent owed at the end of a given month, as a percentage of the total rent due.



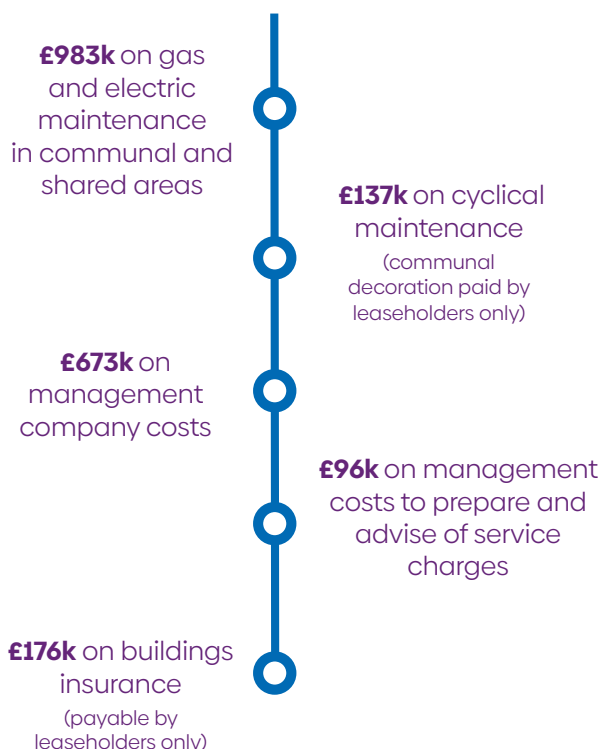


## Service charges

It was a busy time for the Service Charge team who worked hard over the year to prepare and advise our customers of their service charge costs. During the year, a total of £13.4 million was charged to customers to cover the costs of services delivered, of which 86% was recovered, equating to £11.6 million. Below are some examples of how this money has been spent over the course of the year.

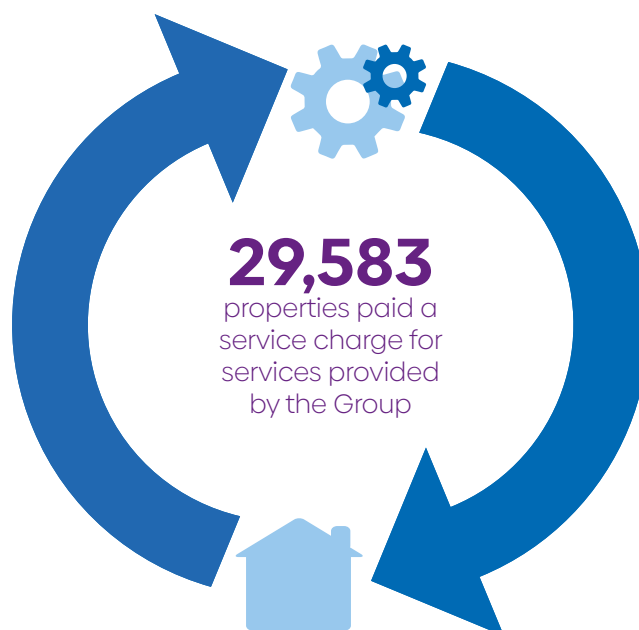


was budgeted and charged to our customers during the year



There was also an additional spend of £2.9 million during the year on reactive services, which are costs we can't predict at the start of the year. This additional spend covered various activities and improvements, such as:

- £443k to clear fly-tipping from communal areas and bin stores
- £109k on tree works
- £347k to complete repairs to fire alarms
- £158k on repairs to door entry systems
- £121k on repairs to communal lifts
- £38k to carry out repairs to personal aids and adaptations
- £59k on repairs to communal TV systems
- £71k on repairs and additional costs to sewerage treatment plants
- £85k on repairs to the building structure or shared areas.



We continue to focus on making sure the service charge costs we send out to you are accurate. While we aim to be as accurate as we can the first time, with over 32,000 homes and some using multiple services, there may be times when we don't get it quite right. We always fully investigate every service charge query we receive and will amend service charges as necessary, so please contact our service charge team on **0333 400 8222**, if you spot anything that doesn't look right.

The team also looked at ways to improve the service to our customers, reducing our response times from 30 to 15 days when we received an enquiry, and carrying out in-year reviews to identify new charges. This has enabled us to let customers know as soon as possible that costs are going to be charged rather than waiting until we issue end of year statements.

## Maintaining our homes



of customers found the repairs process easy



of customers were satisfied with how they were kept informed



of customers were satisfied with the quality of the repair



of customers were satisfied overall with the repair

**£54.7 million**

investment in our existing homes

**“I just wanted to send a thank you.** I have recently had three visits to my home including a boiler service, an electrician and his apprentice and also a plumber and his apprentice. Each one of the team were extremely polite, professional and helpful. The customer service lady was absolutely lovely, and I have always found your service at Aster first class and just wanted to express my thanks.”

- Aster customer

With three national lockdowns, there were times during the year when we had to pause non-urgent repairs inside our customers' homes or cancel and rebook appointments a number of times - often at short notice - as government guidelines and restrictions changed. Combined with colleagues and customers self-isolating, a backlog of work built up creating a challenging working environment for our Maintenance teams.

Nevertheless, the safety of our customers and colleagues remained our highest priority. We adapted to ensure we worked within government guidelines to continue to provide essential services safely. We also worked hard to introduce a same day response to customers faced with no heating or hot water, bringing the average waiting time for a visit down from 19 to 6 hours.

By November 2020, we had managed to catch up with a backlog of 2,500 gas services that had become overdue as a result of the pandemic, in addition to the regular services we usually undertake which totals 30,000 over the year, including 140 commercial heating jobs.

These are amazing achievements given the access and staffing issues we had to factor in due to COVID-19. In addition, we've also seen a reduction in the volume of complaints we received when compared to the same period in the previous two years.

Our Estates team also adapted to ensure we could provide grounds maintenance services throughout the year, and our cleaners ensured enhanced cleaning regimes were put in place in certain locations, like in our Extra Care schemes.

Despite many challenges, we're really pleased to see an improvement on our customer satisfaction rating when it comes to repairs - with a 90% overall satisfaction score. We know that there is always more we can do, and we continue to work hard to improve our service.

Maintenance highlights

85,247  
response repairs  
completed

70,881  
completed  
by Aster trade  
colleagues.

Emergency jobs  
(that were on average  
attended to within  
8 hours 15 minutes)

17,975

16,283 Electrical repairs

Plumbing repairs

16,133

14,384 Gas repairs

Carpentry repairs

14,215

906 Repairs to emergency  
systems including  
fire panels

Repairs to  
emergency  
lighting

987

300 Sewerage repairs

Drainage jobs

1,953

26,559  
servicing works  
completed

Landlords Gas  
Safety Records  
and Services

22,399

Compliance  
related visits  
(relating to water quality,  
fire safety equipment,  
emergency lighting and  
automatic doors)

2,820

Lift services

1,340





**12,670**  
maintenance  
works completed

Full house  
electrical checks

**5,837**

**3,400**

Refuse and fly tipping  
clearances, and  
removal of items from  
communal spaces

Electrical rewires

**1,242**

**722**

Groundwork  
improvements  
(including repairing and  
replacing fencing, brick  
walls, paving and hard  
surfaces)

Adaptations and  
enhancements  
for disabled  
customers

**647**

**540**

Fire Risk Assessments

Tree removals,  
planting and  
maintenance

**282**

## Other

**1,387**

Homes prepared for  
new customers

Commercial  
heating repairs  
and upgrades

**142**

**8,733**  
enhancements  
completed

External  
decorations

**5,172**

**2,399**

Roofs

External doors

**534**

**377**

Heating upgrades

New kitchens

**248**

**3**

Major communal  
area upgrades

## Moonrakers upgrade project Devizes, Wiltshire

Built in 1968, Moonrakers was identified as a block needing some major works. Following a survey of the building and consultation with the customers living there, it was agreed we would carry out significant upgrades. This resulted in an investment of just under £1 million with the works completed in just over four months.



## Neighbourhood enhancements

Through our neighbourhood enhancement project, we listened to our customers' concerns, ideas and feedback and invested around £900,000 to make improvements to our communities.

We love hearing our customers' reactions and thoughts when the work is complete. We've included a few examples of the enhancements we've made this year below along with their feedback.

### Wiltshire Chiminage, Marlborough

Just the other side of some of our homes in Chiminage, Marlborough is a green area of no-man's land which was not being maintained. It was very overgrown with grass, stinging nettles, trees and hedges, and at some points the path forced people to walk on a very busy road.

After talking to customers, we started work cutting back the trees and hedges and we also installed new fencing and grass along the bank. As you can see from the pictures, we think it looks much better now and our residents agree.

#### Customer feedback

"It looks really nice although its different to what we had with the high hedge; it lets more light in the garden. The contractors were amazing, polite, understanding and kept me informed about what they were going to do each day."



"Absolutely amazing. Loving it."

"Well done for getting the improvements sorted on the street. Looks great and the work men were super lovely."



## Wiltshire Colston Road, Devizes

There were a limited number of car parking spaces, at Colston Road which meant customers struggled to park near to where they live. Following resident feedback, we looked at what we could do to help and after talking to our customers, we increased the number of parking bays from four to ten, including a disabled bay by turning an area of unused land into resident parking.

### Customer feedback

"It looks lovely, made good use of the space."

"Really happy with the new car parking area and it has made it a lot easier to park."



"Better use of the space and they certainly have done a good job."

"I am really happy with it. Aster have done a cracking job. More spaces and more room to get in and out of them."

## Hampshire Butlers Close, Lockerley

Although Test Valley Borough Council provided several big bins for residents to use, the bins at Butlers Close often overflowed with rubbish. Agreeing with customers that something needed to be done, we worked with the Environmental Health team at the council to replace the existing bins with individual bin stores, which looks so much better.



## Dorset Turbary Court, Ferndown

For safety and security reasons, mobility scooters need to be stored and charged in designated areas in communal areas. With more people in a block in Ferndown using mobility scooters to get around, we applied to extend the current mobility scooter store by a further nine spaces, which was approved and means more people can store their scooters safely.

### Customer feedback

"The job has been done very well. There is now a lot of room if residents need a scooter space in the future."



## Dorset

### Union Court, Weymouth

Residents at Union Court were storing their bikes in the communal hallway. Anything left in communal areas has the potential to be really dangerous if the building needs to be evacuated in an emergency which is why we have a zero-tolerance approach to items in communal areas. Residents told us that they couldn't keep their bikes in their flats, so we built a new bike store a few months later and residents were really pleased.

#### Customer feedback

"The bicycle storage is an excellent asset as we had no space to store bikes."



## Somerset

### Butt Close, Glastonbury

The gardens at Butt Close were very overgrown and the boundary fencing had deteriorated. We talked with residents about the different improvement options available and we're pleased to say the revamped gardens have given the customers here a fresh opportunity to enjoy their gardens which, during the pandemic especially, was a lifeline for these families.

#### Customer feedback

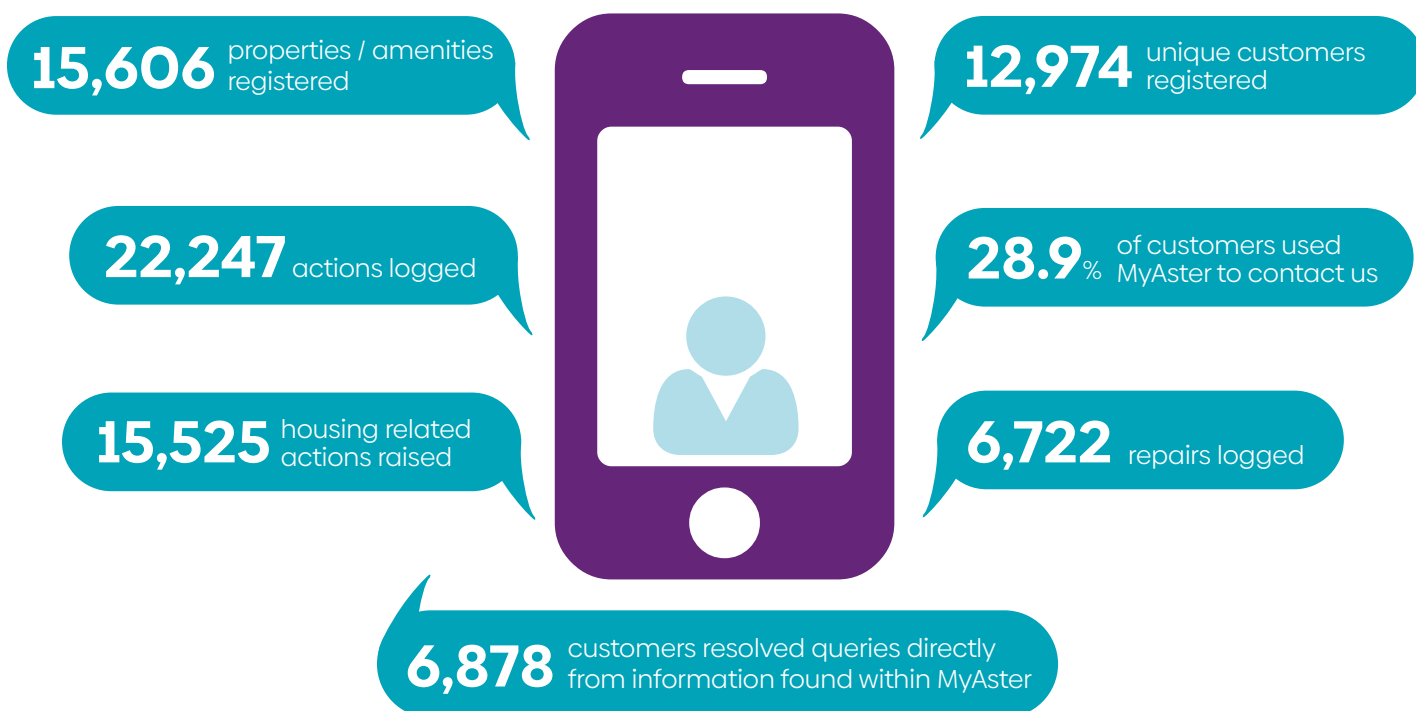
"It's nice to see people enjoying their green space."

"It looks a lot tidier, and they listened to what I asked."

"Really good standard of work."



## MyAster



## Most requested service / query by department



We're delighted that many more customers have signed up to use MyAster, our online self-serve portal this year, taking advantage of the services it offers. It's available to use 24/7, making it easy to access useful services, information, downloads and advice whenever needed. Customers can also make payments and update their details. It's a fantastic way of checking to see what we've done as a result of an enquiry, with a log of the actions that we have taken available to view.

#### Future enhancements

As with all technology, MyAster provides us with a great way to see which parts of the portal are popular, where improvements could be made, or new functionality implemented to make the customer experience even better.

In addition to this we have some exciting plans for MyAster over the next 12 months, which will enable customers to:

- Chat with us more quickly through LiveChat
- Book gas servicing appointments
- Video call the contact centre so we can capture pictures of repair faults helping us to fix more repairs first time.

## Contact centre



of customers said our contact centre staff were knowledgeable and helpful



of customers surveyed found our contact centre staff polite and friendly



of calls answered in 20 seconds (target 80%)



overall satisfaction score

There was a notable drop in the number of enquiries into the contact centre from last year mainly due to the pandemic, but also as more customers use MyAster for things like reporting repairs.

To help improve our service, we introduced a new survey for customers to complete after their interaction with our contact centre, and we're really pleased to have achieved an overall satisfaction score of 92%.

We'll continue to make improvements to enhance the service we provide.



calls received  
(one call every minute)



emails received  
(responded to approx. 20 per hour)



The focus of the Foundation is to support our customers with their life choices and create new opportunities - and we invest in a series of initiatives to make this happen. With the Foundation set to become a charity next year, we hope to be able to enhance the lives of at least 40,000 people by 2030.

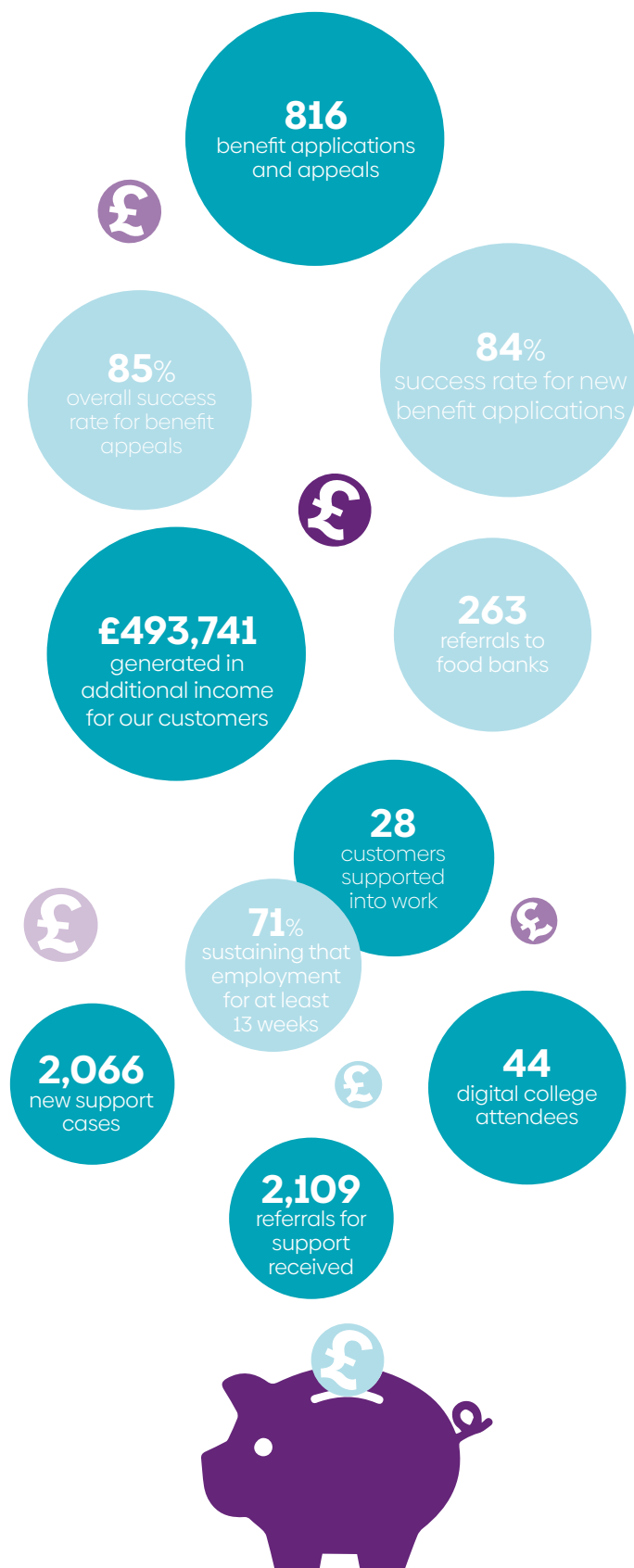
## Financial support

Our dedicated Financial Wellbeing team provides support to customers in financial difficulty. 2020/2021 was an incredibly challenging year for many and our teams worked hard to bridge the gap with external services, resolve complex issues quickly and help make informed decisions about financial situations some of our customers found themselves in.

Our relationships with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), local support agencies, job centres and local authorities were key for us during the pandemic - they meant we could reach those most in need and get them the support they needed. For example, with changes to the benefit system and the introduction of COVID-19 grants, we supported customers who had never engaged with the benefit system before. We also helped to ensure those in the greatest need had food vouchers and utility and mobile phone top ups.

The need for financial support has never been greater and as the additional support packages offered by government come to an end, we hope to continue the close working relationships we have developed with local services to meet the needs of our customers. We're also continuing to develop our links with Step Change, a national debt charity to offer direct referrals for customers struggling with an ongoing debt crisis.

In **2020 / 2021** we managed:



## Welfare Reform

Having a benefit system that can be accessed digitally has been a real saviour for many this past year. With many more people having to claim Universal Credit (UC), an on-line application system has made it easier to access UC payments without having to attend job centre interviews.

We started the year with 6,280 customers claiming UC and ended with over 8,800. We have been able to offer advice to everyone who moved onto UC, helping them to navigate the benefit system while also making arrangements for rents to be paid on time.

We know that UC pays over a month in arrears and for this and many other reasons, customers claiming it often have a higher level of debt with us than those who don't. We've helped customers to pay their rent as best they can, reducing the average debt of a customer on UC from £331 to £242.

We continue to work with the DWP to improve the UC system and the experience of people claiming it. We've attended several virtual workshops and meetings, giving the DWP vital feedback and useful suggestions on how they can improve the service further.

## Mental wellness and resilience

According to the charity Mind, approximately one in four people experience a mental health problem in the UK each year. For us, good mental health, wellbeing and resilience are priorities in work and across our communities.

“That's truly the best course I have ever participated in and I realise now, for the first time in 62 years of life, that I am not the only person to have these types of feelings! I thought it was just me and I wish I could have known about this 40 years ago when I was in my early 20's. The positive thing is that now I have the tools for my tool bag. I'm going to write down three positive things about today this evening! Thank you.”

- Aster customer



## Into Work programme

We offer our customers one-to-one support through our Into Work scheme, where we can help with:

- Curriculum Vitae (CVs) and job applications
- Interview skills and preparation
- Job searching
- Registering with online job sites
- Finding volunteer opportunities
- Work placements and apprenticeships
- IT skills and access to our Digital College.

This year our Into Work programme helped 28 customers who had been unemployed for a long period of time or faced barriers back into work. 71% of those we supported into work have remained in work, with the majority able to transition from benefits and become financially independent.

1,421

people trained in mental wellness and resilience.

3,789

people were positively impacted by this work.

92%

of those who attended our courses say they now feel able to support others.



## Volunteering

Volunteering is our way of investing in communities where they need it the most, supporting local partners and worthwhile causes. It's a fantastic way to make a difference and help us get closer to our communities.

This year our colleagues spent 157.5 days volunteering in our communities. Next year we're launching Aster VIP, our digital platform which connects our colleagues and communities together more than ever before. We're excited for the future and look forward to supporting our communities to thrive.

## Other resident support

Our teams made over 10,000 wellbeing calls to customers following the first lockdown, and we are working with partners, The Bell Group to create a sustainable and vibrant ongoing activity programme for our older communities.

The Foundation also supports the Housing First initiative which aims to tackle homelessness, and our Independent Living Services to support and enable independence for our older customers. This year we housed 16 vulnerable people and a further seven street homeless individuals were housed during the pandemic, helping them to rebuild their lives. At the end of financial year 2020/2021, 83% of Housing First customers had successful tenancies.

## inc.

Our social entrepreneur programme, **inc.** was introduced to inspire, connect, and enable local entrepreneurs to make a difference within and across our communities. A unique ten-month programme covers all areas of business development, growth and ethics. The 10 social entrepreneurs in this year's cohort have so far:



## Case studies

Customers' identities have been changed for privacy and data protection reasons.

### Rosey

Rosey and her then teenage son moved to Wiltshire and their first Aster home after complex family reasons forced a move from the north of England. She had no local support network and was struggling with her confidence.

Rosey had been out of work for several years and was struggling with managing her money and household budget. Our Into Work Officer helped her update her CV, apply for local jobs and training, and find help for the financial cost of new clothing needed for job interviews. We were also able to help and support her son with employment advice and training.

**Rosey secured a full-time job working in a local shop and is now far more confident and positive about the future.**

### Sarah

When Sarah fell ill with a medical condition her whole world fell apart. It left her paralysed and unable to talk or move. She spent five months in hospital and a further four in specialist rehabilitation with no idea of what her future would hold.

On discharge and with her mobility severely affected, Sarah found she could no longer live in her former home and was moved into temporary accommodation. Aster offered her a level access bungalow but unfortunately, because of her change in circumstances she could no longer work and was forced to claim Universal Credit. Our Financial Wellbeing team helped her navigate the processes and applications for grants and the additional financial support she was entitled to.

Sarah was over the moon: **"I couldn't have done this without all your help and support, and I am very grateful."**



### Matt

Matt had been unemployed for some time and was unable to reduce his outstanding debts and arrears. Our Financial Wellbeing Officer helped him build life skills around resilience and sustainability to help him to manage his finances.

**He is now working in a supermarket and he'll be enrolling in a self-employment course with a view to becoming a tour guide.**



### Rebecca

Rebecca wanted to find a job but found her anxiety and depression was making it difficult. Our Into Work team helped her to create a CV and develop the skills she needed to complete application forms.

**Rebecca is now working as a mental health care assistant. It's a permanent role and she is loving the work.**

### William

Following the loss of his partner who he'd cared for full time, William was working with our Financial Wellbeing team to set up claiming benefits and manage his arrears. Once these benefits were in place, he was then referred for our Into Work scheme.

William had previously worked in care, prior to caring for his wife, and was keen to find employment in this area again. We helped him create a CV from scratch and apply for jobs. He was very anxious about using a computer so used an app on his phone instead. This not only helped build some confidence with using technology, but he could also manage the roles he had applied for.

After successfully securing an interview, we helped William to prepare for the meeting and less than a month after we started working together, he secured the position. Unfortunately, the job didn't work out, but we helped him to find alternative employment which he now loves.

**William has even gone on to learn new digital skills to be able to fulfil the role and sustain it.**



## Neighbourhood inspections

While we had to scale back some of our services during the different lockdowns, our committed neighbourhood officers prioritised inspections of high-risk areas and those identified as having significant or urgent health and safety issues, fire risks and repairs that required action.

We also worked with colleagues visiting sites for other reasons to limit contact to keep our customers and our colleagues as safe as possible. Additionally, we worked with many of our customers during this time and we couldn't have done it without their help - so thank you to everyone who assisted and enabled us to keep our neighbourhoods safe and well maintained.

We're really proud of the work our teams carried out this year to help our customers.

“Thank you. You really heard my pleas for help and acted on them so swiftly and so thoroughly, it's something that I won't ever forget.”

- Aster customer

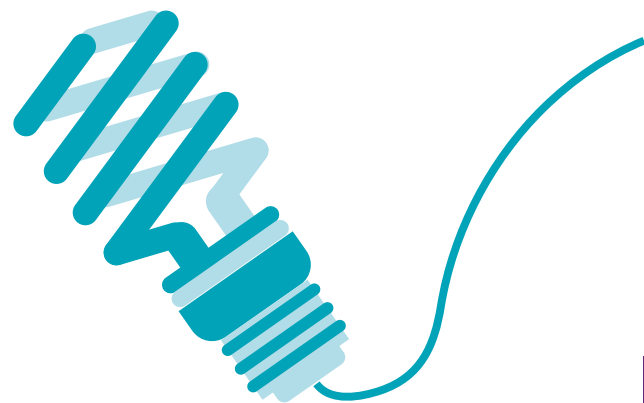


## Environmental sustainability

In order to provide a framework to manage our environmental risks and maximise opportunities, we operate an environmental management system, which is externally certified to the ISO 14001 standard. As part of this, we are continually seeking ways to minimise our environmental impact.

During 2020/2021 we:

- Added 18 new, fuel efficient vehicles to our fleet
- Trialled fully electric and hybrid operational vehicles
- Adopted a 'virtual first' approach to working for non-trade colleagues, reducing the need for our people to travel for business purposes
- Ensured office space was used efficiently and building controls were optimised to reflect reduced building occupancy during the COVID-19 pandemic
- Began a programme to install smart electricity meters at key operational locations
- Replaced 23 inefficient communal boilers at four housing schemes with high-efficiency models (minimum 95% efficient) and upgraded the plant controls at these locations
- We also continued to roll out our Warm Homes project to reduce fuel poverty in up to 400 of our homes by installing central heating. This is helping to bring these properties up to an EPC C standard or better, supporting our target for all homes to have an EPC rating of C or above by 2025. We became a founding member of the Good Homes Alliance (GHA) Pathfinder Network. A network aimed at facilitating housing associations to adopt enhanced sustainability, quality, health and performance standards for new housing developments.



# ASTER & THE ENVIRONMENT



Zero incidences of breaking environmental law.



Reduce business mileage by 10% by the end of 2020/21.



Reduce corporate energy use by 10% by the end of 2020/21.

Divert 95% of our waste from landfill by the end of 2020/21.

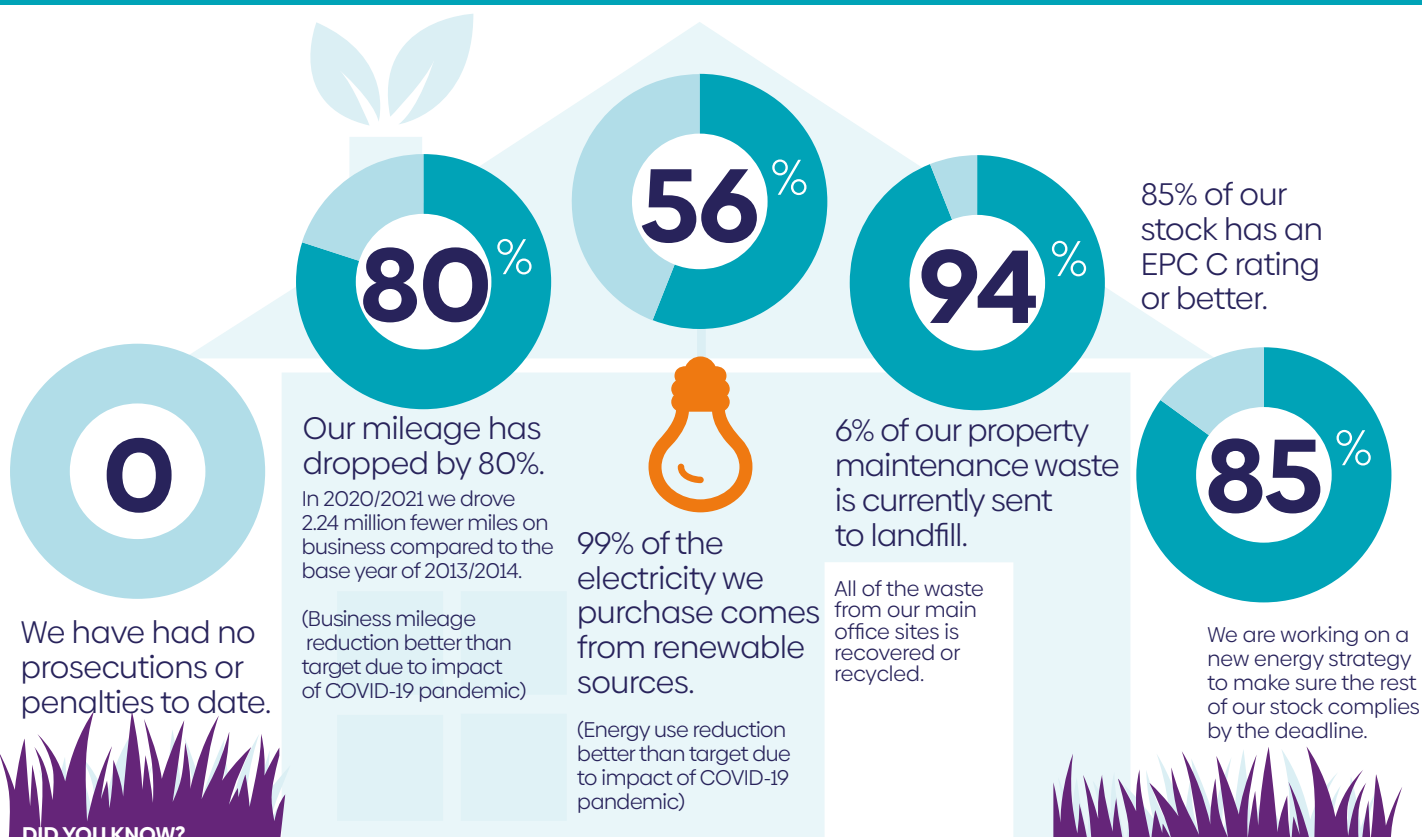


All of our homes will have a minimum EPC (energy efficiency) rating of C by 2025.



## TARGETS

## CURRENT PERFORMANCE



We have had no prosecutions or penalties to date.

Our mileage has dropped by 80%.  
In 2020/2021 we drove 2.24 million fewer miles on business compared to the base year of 2013/2014.

(Business mileage reduction better than target due to impact of COVID-19 pandemic)

99% of the electricity we purchase comes from renewable sources.

(Energy use reduction better than target due to impact of COVID-19 pandemic)

6% of our property maintenance waste is currently sent to landfill.

All of the waste from our main office sites is recovered or recycled.

85% of our stock has an EPC C rating or better.

We are working on a new energy strategy to make sure the rest of our stock complies by the deadline.

### DID YOU KNOW?

Aster has an environmental management system which is certified to the international standard ISO 14001:2015. This helps us manage our impact on the environment and improve our environmental performance.

To further evidence our commitment to environmental sustainability, we launched our first Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) report earlier this year, demonstrating our environmental responsibility and how our activities have had a positive impact on people in our communities. Following this we successfully secured £250 million for investment in greener new build homes. Head over to our website to read the full report.

# Social Housing White Paper

Last year the government published **The Charter for Social Housing Residents: Social Housing White Paper**. The paper sets out the government's plans to make sure social housing customers live in good quality homes which are safe, they are listened to and treated fairly and with respect - and landlords put things right when things go wrong.

The focus of the paper is on building and customer safety, making sure customer voice is heard and empowering you to find out more information about how we are performing in lots of different areas.

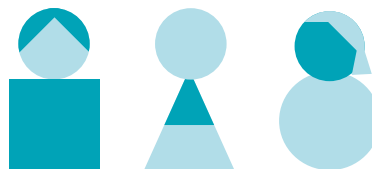
The paper is a positive step for anyone living in social housing, and of course has an impact on us too. As the paper progresses, we'll be looking at whether we need to make any changes to the way we work as a result of any new legislation or regulations. Because of the way a 'white paper' becomes either legislation or regulation, there is still quite a way to go before the proposals in the paper can become law.

We've been working hard to ensure everyone is aware of the white paper and the expectations and opportunities it brings. We've consulted with our involved customer groups to discuss the paper and update them on how we plan to meet the requirements. We also shared the outcome of our initial assessment, which highlighted where we have work to do, and to agree what those priority areas should be.

We have also started to look at the performance information available to our customers, which is in preparation for Chapter Two of the Social Housing White Paper. The Regulator of Social Housing will shortly begin work to consult with both landlords and customers to put in place and agree a set of 'Tenant Satisfaction Measures' to provide greater transparency between landlords and their customers. The measures will focus on the areas which matter to customers, such as building safety, complaints handling and neighbourhood management, and we're already working towards ensuring this information will be available. In fact, lots of this information is already in this report.

Overall, we think the paper presents us with a real opportunity to continue improving our services and make sure we're providing the best customer experience we can. Prior to the white paper's release, we had already started on a journey of service transformation, which for us is about delivering safe and reliable services, focused on quality and putting the customer at the centre of our approach.

Many of the themes from the Social Housing White Paper are central to our transformation programme, Programme Experience, which sets out how we will evolve over the next five years to better serve you and our colleagues. Working with you we will improve our offer by using insight, data and technology to design modern, reliable services that support sustainable communities and promote a customer first culture.



To achieve this, we have five key principles:

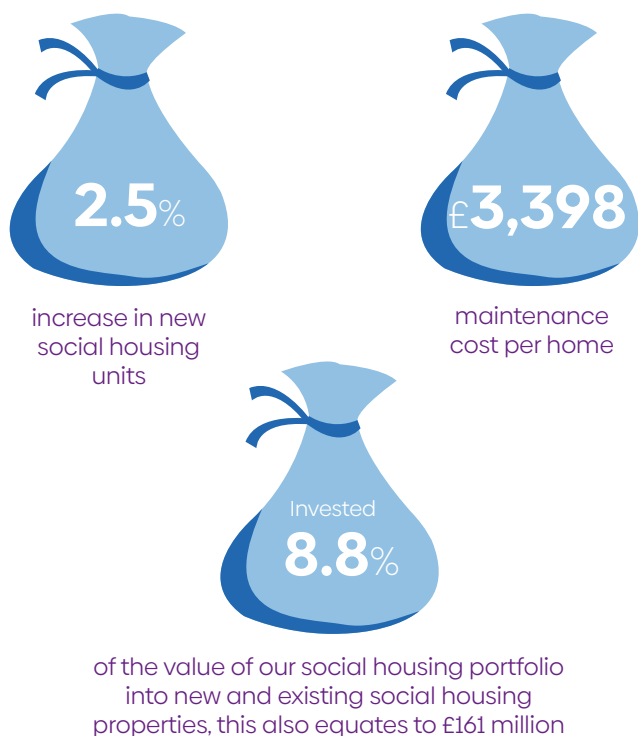
1. Customer Voice – Using customer voice to co-design our services and improve delivery
2. Connected Customer – Making it easy for our customers to contact us, expanding our digital self-service offer and organising our teams so we can better support our customers
3. Customer Focused Culture – Strengthening our culture of putting our customers at the heart of everything that we do
4. Proactive Customer Services – Working together with our partners we will use data and technology to provide safe, well maintained and sustainable homes and communities
5. Effective Customer Services – Modernising and simplifying the way we work so that we can deliver a quality service right first time that helps limit our environmental impact and improve efficiency.

Delivering against each of these principles will mean that we not only meet, but go beyond, the white paper requirements. It affirms our vision of a customer centred approach to how we will deliver our services, and most importantly the opportunities our customers will have to help us with this. Customer Voice is a key, central theme and making sure you have the opportunity to shape our services and be part of those decisions which affect you, is very important to us.

We hope it's reassuring to know that our business is well placed to respond over the coming years, and we'll keep you informed as things progress. Of course, if you would like to find out more about this please do contact us, or alternatively if you would like to get involved then contact our Customer Voice team: **customervoice@aster.co.uk**.



## Value for money



Value for Money has always formed a central part of our culture, recognising the importance of both social and financial value. Our approach balances the needs of our customers with our social value and in meeting future housing need. We look to strike the right balance between investment and value for money for our customers.

Our aim is to provide modern customer-focused, easily accessible, and safe customer services. This is supported by our long-term investment strategy to make best use of our resources that secure social or economic value.

By selling a very small number of poor performing homes we generated income of £18.4 million this year, which will be reinvested into improving the services we offer and in building more new homes. We will always ensure that local needs are considered and balanced with the opportunities for reinvestment in existing homes and neighbourhoods.

Through the delivery of 817 new affordable homes this year, our dedicated teams worked with our supply chain to ensure we maximised value for our customers without compromising on quality.

Our CLT partnerships have supported our social value by helping to build sustainable communities by providing affordable homes to meet local need.

For more information, the full Value for Money report can be found in our annual report on our website [www.aster.co.uk](http://www.aster.co.uk).

## Customer satisfaction

Customer satisfaction is hugely important to us and is one of the measures we use to see where we're getting things right and where we may need to improve. We're always pleased when customers take the time to provide feedback and complete our surveys as this helps us to shape the services we provide.

Bearing in mind the hugely disruptive circumstances of the pandemic, we're pleased our customers are generally happy with the services we provide, and we're appreciative of the feedback they have given us. This will play an important role in helping us understand where we can improve our services, however we appreciate there is still some work to do. We'll be working hard over the coming year to improve our customer satisfaction even further across all customer groups.





## Customer Voice

Over **3,750**  
customers responded to our  
consultations **this year**

The largest  
response to a single  
consultation was  
**662** customers  
out of **921**  
surveyed (72%)

Average response rates from our  
policy consultations increased  
from **16%** to **29%**  
by the **end of the year**

**30**  
consultations  
to improve  
services

**11**  
policy  
consultations

Customer Voice is at the heart of everything we do. It's crucial we understand what's important to our customers and give them the opportunity to help improve our services, and influence the decisions we make about their home and the communities they live in. We are delighted that more customers than ever have been involved with providing feedback to us this past year, so a big thank you to everyone who has taken part – we couldn't do it without you.

We continued to work with our involved customer groups throughout the pandemic by moving meetings online. We hope that this new way of working will make our groups more agile, offer better value for money, and remove barriers to other customers' involvement.

Alongside this we have been working hard to close the loop on the feedback we receive. When we carry out a piece of work or consultation, we will communicate back to our customers on how their feedback has influenced what will happen next, demonstrating the impact of that feedback. Likewise, there are occasions when we receive comments or queries that are not related to the consultation, and we have ensured that these are answered, where possible, to ensure we act on what we are told.

In 2021/2022, we'll be working to ensure we meet the requirements of the Social Housing White Paper, while continuing to evolve and improve the number of ways customers can give us feedback. Furthermore, we'll promote our work and demonstrate the impact customer feedback has had on our decision making and services we deliver.

### Highlights:

- Our Customer Voice Commitments were approved by the Customer and Community Network in September 2020. They demonstrate our commitment to ensuring customer feedback influences service delivery, and that there are measures in place to remove barriers and ensure representative responses to our consultations. The commitments can be found on our Customer Voice website page
- Our Customer Voice Policy approved this year by the Customer Overview Group, will support the integral Customer Voice element of The Future of Customer Experience Strategic Framework
- All new customers who join us from March 2021 will receive a new customer survey asking if they would like to be involved and help us to shape the services we deliver.

## How our customers have helped shape our services

We've had lots of great feedback from our customers this year, here are a few examples:

### 1. Service Recovery Plan

We surveyed 646 customers from our consultation groups in May 2020, to ask for their thoughts on clearing the repairs backlog following the first COVID-19 lockdown. We had a great response rate of 42%, with many customers telling us that we should suspend our planned maintenance work to catch up on the backlog of repairs, which we did.

### 2. Procurement and estates tender

As part of a procurement review, the estates services tender was up for renewal, starting with Grounds Maintenance (GM). We wanted customers to help us decide what was in and out of scope so we surveyed 594 customers about their priorities in relation to cost vs quality, what a quality GM service means to them, and the social value the chosen contractor should bring to our communities.

We had a response rate of 49% and these priorities informed the evaluation, interview and selection processes. Four customers were put forward to evaluate the customer elements of the method statements, and two customers carried out the interviews alongside three of our colleagues. There will of course be customer satisfaction measures once the contract has been awarded to ensure customer involvement before, during and after.

### 3. Kitchen range for planned maintenance

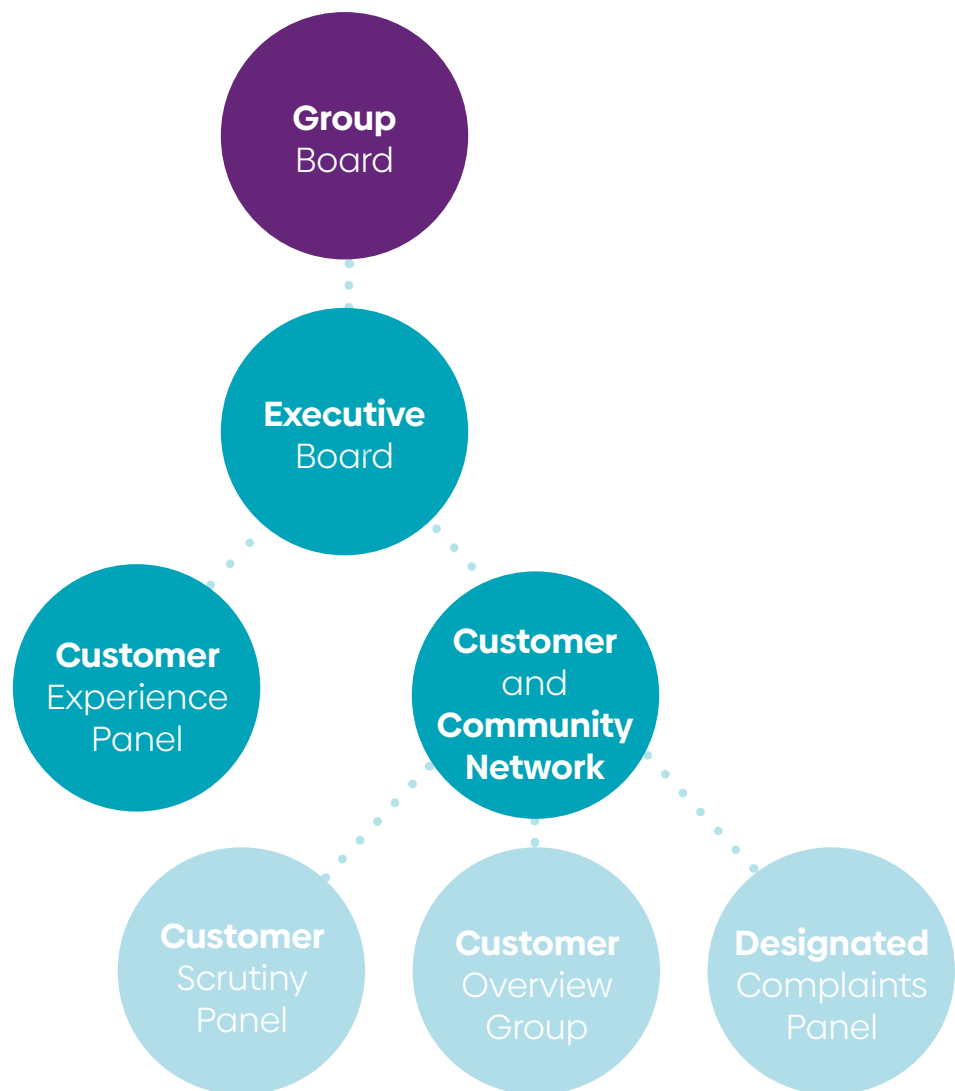
With the range of worktops and cupboards we use for kitchen replacements due for review, we sent out a survey to 921 customers so that they could choose the new range. We had a phenomenal 627 customers respond, which is a fantastic 72% response rate.

We're always looking for more customers to join our groups. To find out more, please contact **[customervoice@aster.co.uk](mailto:customervoice@aster.co.uk)**. There will be recruitment events over the coming year which will give customers not currently involved in our groups the opportunity to get involved.



## Our customer groups

Due to the pandemic, all of our groups moved to virtual meetings and collectively have felt many benefits from this new way of working. It has allowed them to become more dynamic, cut down on travel time and learn new digital skills. Some groups also welcomed new members bringing further knowledge, experience and skill resource to the table.



## Customer Overview Group (COG) Update

### Karen Gregory

#### Customer and COG Chair

COG is a customer led panel that ensures Aster is putting the customer first and delivering customer focused services. We do this through a variety of ways, such as monitoring service performance and customer satisfaction results, making sure the customer is central to Aster's planned approach. From January 2021, we also took over reviewing and approving customer service-related policies, which was previously handled by the Customer and Community Network (CNN).

Over the last year we received training and insight on Aster's Policy Methodology. This document guides those reviewing policy, making sure there is a consistent approach, and it was given a thorough review. Importantly, it ensures consultation plays a key stage in the process, with both Aster colleagues and customers.

In 2020/2021 we approved:

- The Leasehold Management Policy and the Customer Voice Policy.

We also focused on:

- Progress of the "Service Recovery" plan
- Development of the Sustainability Strategy
- A revised and improved COG Terms of Reference
- Influencing the refreshed Customer Voice Commitments
- Setting customer service performance measures for 2021/2022
- Reviewing satisfaction and performance data.

Our work during the year has aimed to improve the service provided to you. We have a forward plan for 2021/2022 and we have identified service areas we would like to work with to understand how they aim to deliver a good customer experience as well as any improvements they could make.

## Customer Scrutiny Panel (CSP) Update

### Kate Forth

#### Customer and CSP Chair

Our team of five members provides an independent customer focussed assessment of Aster's services and processes. It is particularly important that we undertake our scrutiny of services from the customers' point of view.

We have completed two scrutiny reviews this year, one on the Lettings service and the other with the Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) service. The ASB scrutiny commenced in February 2020, kicking off with a presentation from the ASB team. Following this we conducted two surveys: one with Aster staff to get their views on the service and another went out to customers, facilitated by the Customer Voice team to inform our recommendations.

The panel presented its findings to the Housing Leadership Team in October 2020. All recommendations included in the report were agreed.

The recommendations included:

- Recruitment of additional team members
- Implementation of a clear customer feedback channel
- Allocation of a temporary case-load officer if the assigned officer is out of the business
- Improvement of the frequency of communication with customers.

We gave 133 hours of our personal time to this scrutiny. All our work ensures your interests are at the centre of all recommendations and we remain committed to this work.



# Customer and Community Network Update

## Tracey Peters

### Customer and Community Network (CCN) Chair

Customers, independent members, Executive and Non-Executive Directors who are members of this committee have worked hard this year to push forward the customer service agenda, while making sure all our customers were supported in a way chosen by them.

When we moved to virtual meetings, the Chairs of the CCN, COG and Customer Scrutiny Panel (CSP), were invited to a fortnightly meeting with Directors, to ensure feedback was moving from customers to Aster and back again. This meant that very quickly Aster were able to offer the right level of service for customers and were able to pinpoint difficulties and concerns and take action. We really appreciated the immense amount of work completed by the CSP and COG. This allowed us to have valuable insight about our customers, which we then used to inform the Aster Group Board. This flow of information is what makes our role in the Governance process work.

A major focus for us this year was supporting the development of the Future of Customer Experience Framework, critiquing, offering ideas and challenging throughout. Two of our newest members, Angela Powney and Denise Harper, who have joined Mark Skellon and Steph Taylor, were part of this work and their contributions have been so important. We very much appreciate their commitment and determination in getting things right for customers.

An enormous amount of 'business as usual' has also been done this year including Policy Approvals, Risk Management, Regulatory Compliance and Service Performance Management. We have also reviewed our Terms of Reference and by working with the COG, we have ensured that these customer groups can focus on the areas that are most effective for you.

This year the CCN has also:

- Discussed and reviewed 'The Charter for Social Housing Residents: Social Housing White Paper', identifying the important elements for customers and welcoming its focus on safety, complaints handling and improved customer satisfaction measures
- Reviewed customer and colleague data and insight around the new customer services framework
- Reviewed changes to the Ombudsman code and approved the new Complaints Policy to ensure compliance.

The year started in a way that none of us could have predicted, however it has ended with the CCN having had a busy and successful year. Alongside the other customer groups, we can be proud of what we have learned and how we have ensured the customer is always at the heart of Aster's approach.

# Designated Complaints Panel (DCP) Update

## Phil Love

### Customer and DCP Chair

The DCP is a team of specially trained customers who are there to help and support you with service issues. We're registered with the Housing Ombudsman and value our role as an independent group that will provide an objective view when reviewing complaints, should a resolution not have been reached during the formal complaints process.

We're pleased to say that of the few complaints referred to the Housing Ombudsman after our review, they've agreed with our decision. This supports our strength in the complaint process and our value in providing an independent view.

When we review a complaint, we put forward recommendations to improve customer experience. An example from this year involved the process for terminating a garage licence. We conducted a review following a dispute about outstanding rent and the process to end the garage licence. An agreement was reached to resolve the complaint and recommendations to enhance the process were accepted by Aster.

We were also fully involved in the development of the recently reviewed Complaints Policy, and implementing measures set out in the Housing Ombudsman's revised Complaint Handling Code.

It isn't all complaint work that we deal with. This year we also contributed to setting customer service-related performance measures and helped develop the complaints element of Aster's service redesign project with Aster's service design team.

## Compliments

Our people work really hard to provide a good service and it means a lot when we receive praise for a job well done, so thank you to the customers who took the time to show their appreciation.

484

compliments  
received



“Emily was very friendly and professional and couldn't do enough to help us. She was **exceptional** and very understanding.”

“Ross has done a **fabulous** job of fixing our door. Lovely work and very polite and helpful member of staff.”

“**Thank you** for fixing my radiator. Jack was super and worked on the problem for ages.”

“I would like to thank Claire who has been incredibly **supportive** during a difficult time.”

## Complaints

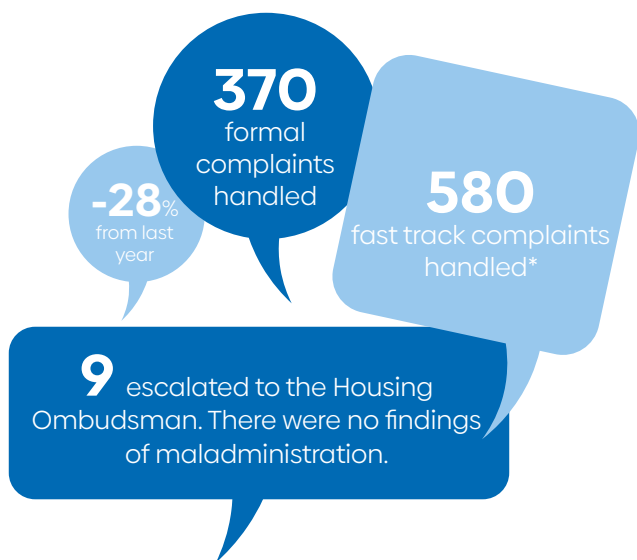
Sometimes things go wrong and regrettably there may be times when our customers aren't completely happy with the service we provide. Learning from our mistakes and reflecting on their feedback plays an important part in helping us to improve.

In July 2020, the Housing Ombudsman Service released a new Complaint Handling Code, which all landlords must comply with. The aim of the code is to provide a customer focused complaints process and it details the time-scales, the number of stages and how customers can escalate their complaint if they remain dissatisfied with the outcome.

We already had in place a clearly explained and accessible complaints service, but the publication of the new code provided an opportunity to review how we manage complaints while incorporating the new mandatory requirements.

Following consultation with our involved customers, the Complaints Policy was updated and a new streamlined two stage complaints process was introduced in November 2020. The complaints policy has since been refreshed again with wider customer consultation.

Our progress and achievements in implementing the code is published on our complaint's web page as a self-assessment, which is another requirement of the code. Our complaints policy and procedure set clear standards in how we manage complaints ensuring the process is clearly explained, fair, fast and easy to access.



\*A fast-track complaint can be dealt with quickly and efficiently as part of 'day to day' business and is dealt with outside the formal complaints process. This approach is taken if it will offer the best outcome for the customer.



This year we focused more on how we can learn from customer complaints to support improvements in the services we provide. The DCP also regularly make recommendations to us about how we can make improvements as part of their complaint reviews. This can include changes to a policy, a procedure or process. An example of some of the learnings from complaints include:

#### Complaints about water damage

Complaints are often received about damage caused by water leaks where customers may assume that damage caused by leaks in the property will be automatically compensated for by us. During the year articles have been published in customer e-shots dispelling the commonly held misunderstanding about responsibilities and highlighting the availability and affordability of the content insurance scheme approved by the National Housing Federation.

#### Complaint about succeeding a tenancy

Sadly, a complaint was received from a resident in one of our homes following the death of her father due to COVID-19.

Now in her 30s, she had lived in the family home all her life and was keen to remain living there. However, she was not permitted to remain in the property as previously her father had held the tenancy jointly with her mother, and following the mother's death, had 'succeeded' the tenancy. A further succession was therefore not possible.

The resident was understandably very upset as were the rest of her family who all felt that we were trying to be difficult and causing additional grief to the resident at a very difficult and emotional time.

The complaint investigation identified a number of issues with our standard communications with the customer. In addition, it identified the situation was not helped by the absence of a procedure covering how a resident not holding a tenancy may stay in the home whilst seeking alternative living arrangements. The process is now under review along with the development of a new procedure. This will ensure we can better handle situations like this in the future and offer appropriate and consistent guidance to next of kin in similar circumstances.



# Get **involved**

Tell us what you think.

If you want to get involved in helping us to shape our services, then email **[customervoice@aster.co.uk](mailto:customervoice@aster.co.uk)** or visit **[www.aster.co.uk](http://www.aster.co.uk)**.