

Customer and Community Engagement Policy

Scope of Policy

This policy sets out the commitments of Platform Housing Group (the Group) in relation to customer and community engagement. We consider a customer to be any person occupying a home owned by the Group, regardless of tenure (tenant, lessee or shared owner).

Applicability

The policy applies to all members of the Group.

1. Policy Statement

- 1.1 The Group is as much about customers and communities as homes and properties and delivers services to an increasingly diverse range of customers and community groups, with very different and changing needs.

Our customers are at the heart of our business and we want to make sure that we communicate with them and listen to them effectively. It is essential that we develop effective ways to capture valuable insight and feedback from our customers about our services and their local neighbourhoods and communities and that we are using this effectively to improve and inform future services, including future Community Investment projects.

Our Customer and Community Engagement Strategy sets out how we will develop options for customers to engage with us, providing a range of accessible options to allow them to choose the best way to suit them.

In using the term ‘customer and community engagement’ we are referring to the opportunities that we have to listen to customers, capture their feedback and work with them to design services and deliver community-based projects. It also encompasses some of the ways we inform customers about the organisation and their local neighbourhoods and communities.

- 1.2 This policy sets out our overall commitment in relation to customer and community engagement and is supported by our Customer and Community Engagement Strategy 2021–2026.

2. Context

2.1 Political and Regulatory Context

The Localism Act 2011 brought about substantial changes to regulation separating the “economic” aspects of regulation from “consumer” regulation placing a requirement on providers to be transparent and ensure that they offer customers greater opportunities for involvement, with customers having a greater input in monitoring social landlord’s performance.

The Act reformed the way that social housing is regulated and provided social tenants with stronger tools to hold their landlords to account. It also requires social landlords to support tenant panels - or similar bodies - in order to give tenants the opportunity to carefully examine the services being offered.

More recently The Charter for Social Housing Residents: Social Housing White Paper published in November 2020 marked the beginning of a range of regulatory reforms for social housing placing a greater emphasis on the importance of listening and acting on the tenant voice.

The Charter covers 7 themes detailing what all social housing tenants can expect from their landlord. The fifth theme sets out the following expectation:

- **To have your voice heard by your landlord**, for example through regular meetings, scrutiny panels or being on its board. The government will provide access to help, if you want it, for you to learn new skills to ensure your landlord listens.

The Charter led to the development of an updated regulatory regime through the Social Housing (Regulation) Act 2023. This new act of parliament places a range of new requirements on social landlords including the introduction of proactive consumer regulation.

This change has removed the 'serious detriment test' which had to be met before the Regulator of Social Housing (RSH) could intervene on consumer matters. The proactive consumer regulatory remit now requires the RSH to proactively regulate the level of service that social landlords provide to their tenants.

- 2.2 The new consumer standards will come into force in April 2024 with changes to strengthen how the RSH regulates social landlords.

2.3 **Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard**

The current Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard, which was last updated in 2017, sets out requirements for Registered Providers to support tenants to develop and implement opportunities for involvement and empowerment.

There is an expectation that customers are given a range of opportunities to be involved in, and influence, policies, decisions, and monitor and scrutinise performance. We are committed to ensuring that customers are involved in meeting this standard.

2.4 **Better Social Housing Review (BSHR)**

The Better Social Housing Review was set up in June 2022 by the National Housing Federation and the Chartered Institute of Housing to address social housing issues in

England. The review was carried out by an independent panel with the aim of making practical recommendations to social housing providers, the government, and other stakeholders.

The review resulted in 7 core recommendations including the following two in relation to the customer voice and community engagement:

- Housing associations should work with all tenants to ensure that they have a voice and influence at every level of decision making across the organisation, through both voluntary and paid roles.
- Housing associations should develop a proactive local community presence through community hubs which foster greater multi-agency working.

3. Aims and Objectives

3.1 The aim of this policy is to:

- Set out our commitment to involving and engaging with our customers.
- Detail our approach and commitment to ensuring that customers are at the heart of shaping and improving the services we deliver to them by providing a range of opportunities to work in partnership to design and improve services, shape and improve our services.
- Emphasise that customers are central to our work with stakeholders in creating thriving and sustainable communities.
- Reinforce our approach to effective community engagement.

Through this policy we aim to:

- Work in partnership with our customers in order to scrutinise our performance, and to co-create and co-design services.
- Support the activities of customer panels or groups by providing support, information and training.
- Understand the needs of our customers.
- Listen and act upon the customer voice.
- Provide customers with a range of opportunities to get involved in a way that they feel most comfortable.
- Recognise the individuality and needs of our customers and respect their diversity ensuring customer involvement opportunities are accessible to all.
- Provide a range of options to communicate effectively with our customers.
- Provide customers with updates on our performance (including cost information), and how their views have impacted on decisions and service delivery.
- Work with partners and other organisations to ensure customers get the very best from available resources.
- Monitor and evaluate outcomes from customer and community engagement activities through a test and learn approach.

4. Policy Outline

4.1 Governance

We are committed to providing customers with the opportunity to shape our services and scrutinise our performance.

4.1.1 To ensure that our customers are at the heart of our business we work with our Customer Voice Panel (CVP) which has a clear focus on co-regulation and scrutinising our performance from a customers' perspective and is part of the Group's formal governance structure. The CVP is a partnership of customers, Group colleagues and board members. Customers represent all our key regional operating areas.

4.1.2 The CVP has clear Terms of Reference that outline their key responsibilities. These responsibilities include their role in, monitoring the implementation of the customer focussed strategies and relevant customer experience policies to enable us to better fulfil the Group's objectives, in particular, delivery of a high quality customer experience.

The CVP also has responsibility for budgets that have been made available to fund projects in local neighbourhoods and communities (Platform Community Chest).

4.1.3 We will consult customers at least once every three years on the best way of involving customers in the governance and scrutiny of our housing management service.

4.2 Accountability

We welcome and recognise the value of customers scrutinising our services and performance and making recommendations to ensure that our services are the best that they can be.

4.2.1 In addition to the role of the CVP in our governance framework, the Group has a customer Scrutiny Panel, whose role is to scrutinise our services and performance. Recommendations that are made by the Scrutiny Panel are used to drive improvements in the services we provide across the Group. Recommendations made by the Scrutiny Panel are monitored by CVP and the Group Board.

4.2.2 We will ensure that customers are provided with the information that they require to be able to effectively scrutinise our performance. This includes performance information, complaints information, customer experience reports, policies and benchmarking results.

Where relevant, as part of scrutiny reviews, employees will support members of the customer Scrutiny Panel, for example by supplying materials, information or facilitating interviews with colleagues.

We will continue to work with customers to ensure that they are provided with the necessary information they require to scrutinise our services and performance.

- 4.2.3 We understand that complaints, comments, and compliments from customers provide us with an opportunity to learn from our mistakes and successes and demonstrate accountability to our customers.

The Complaints, Comments and Compliments Policy and procedures provides customers with another tool to challenge and provide feedback on any area of our service.

4.3 **Involvement Opportunities**

We recognise the need to offer a flexible range of options for our customers to engage with us and have developed a range of involvement opportunities to provide customers with flexibility and choice to enable them to get involved in a way that best suits them.

As a Group, we currently offer a wide range of activities and roles enabling customers to get involved. The roles and opportunity that we offer include, but are not limited to:

- Membership of the Customer Voice Panel
- Membership of the Scrutiny Panel
- Membership of the Customer Sounding Board to carry out a range of engagement activities including:
 - Mystery Shopping
 - Focus Groups
 - Reviewing a range of customer documents
 - Testing software
 - Involvement in recruitment panels for Platform colleagues
 - Survey feedback
 - Co-creation
- Becoming a Complaint Reviewer
- Taking part in Community Engagement activities including:
 - Providing feedback on local consultations and activities
 - Becoming a Community Rep
 - Applying for Community Chest funding
- Volunteering as a Digital Champion and other volunteer roles.

Where relevant, roles will have Role Profiles in place to clearly set out the requirements of the role.

4.4 **Communication**

We recognise that good communication is pivotal to achieving a positive relationship with our customers and ensuring they have clear pathways for communication is

essential. This includes information about service improvements, opportunities for customer engagement, community engagement initiatives, and performance information.

There is a growing demand for online and digital communication and whilst this is our preferred approach, we recognise the need to communicate effectively with customers who do not wish to engage with us digitally ensuring that they have the same level of access to information.

- 4.4.1 We recognise the need to provide customers with clear and accurate information about the cost of our services so that they can monitor our performance to ensure they are delivered in line with our policies and processes and represent value for money.

Where we are proposing any significant changes to our management arrangements, we will consult with customers, setting out the cost and benefits of any options.

- 4.4.2 We aim to use a range of communication methods and will explore new ways of interacting with our customers. Customer insight and feedback has shown us that there is a growing appetite from customers to offer a wider range of information through digital platforms.

In addition to traditional methods, we are committed to utilising new and innovative approaches to communicating with customers including social media, podcasts, blogs and our website.

- 4.4.3 We aim to provide customers with as many opportunities as possible to interact with us, from formal methods, such as reporting a complaint, to informal methods such as a discussion at a community event.

Our Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy (2021-2026) recognises the importance of ensuring our services are accessible to all, and we will work to make sure that employees are provided with the necessary tools in order to be able to communicate with a diverse range of customers.

- 4.4.4 We aim to make engagement opportunities accessible and inclusive to all customers to ensure that the voices of all customers are heard. We will do this by utilising available data on customers and communities to inform the delivery of activity types and support provided. Examples include, but are not limited to:

- Developing targeted communications in other languages where we have non-English speaking communities.
- Arranging community transport to events to make activities accessible to customers with limited mobility.
- Dedicated activities such as seated exercise sessions for customers with limited mobility.

- Working with specialist organisations to develop digital inclusion support for visually impaired customers.

We will work with individual customers to support them to engage in activities by tailoring and adapting approaches to be more inclusive. Examples include, but are not limited to:

- Providing communications in alternative formats.
- Providing 1:1 support where possible with transport, completing feedback and enabling alternative approaches to feed into an exercise e.g. where a customer is unable to join in a group activity, we will support them to input their views in other ways.

4.5 Co-Design and Co-Creation

We aim to provide our customers with the tools and mechanisms to be able to influence decision making, take an active part in improving the communities in which they live, and the services that we deliver.

Customers also have other opportunities to influence our services. This includes, but is not limited to, the following options:

- Working with us to select the contractors we use.
- Taking part in a focussed 'co-creation' exercise.
- Taking an active role in all service reviews that take place across the Group through scrutiny and other dedicated panels and groups.
- Taking part in mystery shopping, which allows us to check the quality of our services.
- Taking part in focus groups to review and influence the development of our services.
- To carry our testing to software to test and influence the design of our digital services.
- Informing policy and strategy as part of the Customer Voice Panel.
- Reviewing the performance of locally delivered services or contracts as a Community Rep.
- Having the opportunity to bid for funding through Platform Community Chest for projects and environmental and safety improvements to the areas in which they live.

4.6 Support for Customers

We are committed to investing the time and resources required to achieve the objectives in this policy. This includes support for both customers and employees.

Across the Group, we have a team of Customer and Community Engagement colleagues whose role it is to encourage and support customers to get involved in customer and community engagement activities.

- 4.6.1 We aim to ensure that customers are equipped with the skills and resources they require to carry out involvement activities. We will do this by providing financial support for such activities, training appropriate to the role or activity, and ensuring that employees are available to answer any queries that customers may have.

We will provide digital support to customers to enable them to get involved where possible. This can include digital advice and coaching, support with access to broadband and the provision equipment in roles that require more time commitment.

We will ensure that customers are not out-of-pocket from their involvement in activities that support us in reviewing and shaping our services. We will provide food/refreshments and reimburse all reasonable expenses in line with the Group Travel and Expenses Policy incurred through involvement in activities.

We are committed to rewarding customers for their commitment and assess each project or activity individually and will make customers aware of the associated reward prior to them taking part.

- 4.6.2 We are committed to providing a range projects and activities to support customers who may want to further develop their skills and capacity.

We recognise that there is a range of needs and preferences amongst communities across the Group's diverse localities and aim to provide more training and support services that can support customers to develop their confidence, access employment, more successfully sustain their tenancy and get involved in the roles we offer.

4.7 **Community Cohesion**

We recognise that our duty as a Registered Provider goes beyond that of building and managing homes. It extends to the development of sustainable communities in the areas in which we work. We are therefore committed to supporting the local communities in areas where we operate, and to working with wider communities where we are a landlord.

- 4.7.1 We aim to work in partnership with customers and specialist local organisations, where appropriate, so that we are doing all that we can to sustain and develop the communities in which we work.

Investing in local community facilities also allows us to encourage a sense of community and encourage sustainable communities.

- 4.7.2 Customers can improve neighbourhoods by suggesting ideas for community based events or activities or physical improvements.

In addition to support from our colleagues, and our internal budgets, we have community funding available through Platform Community Chest where customers

and other organisations can apply for funding for community events, projects or improvements, subject to criteria.

4.7.3 The Customer Voice Panel have responsibility of reviewing and assessing Platform Community Chest applications. In providing funding we aim to support our objectives, as outlined in our Customer and Community Engagement Strategy, of:

- Increasing tenancy sustainment
- Reducing anti-social behaviour
- Increasing digital inclusion
- Increasing community cohesion
- Improving health and wellbeing
- Increasing skills and employability

4.7.4 Our Community Rep role is dedicated local community focussed engagement.

Customers in this role work in partnership with local teams to support us in ensuring neighbourhoods are safe, friendly and tidy place to live. This role provides customers with the opportunity to be an active voice in their local community, talking to other customers to promote community cohesion. This role also ensures that we have a customer perspective on a range of local issues, such as standards of cleaning, grass cutting and grounds maintenance and helps us to identify potential improvements or new initiatives that could support the local community.

4.7.5 We will deliver events in our communities to engage with customers locally through a range of activity types covering a variety of themes. These include, but are not limited to:

- Our Communities Connected programme - to deliver a range of activities from gardening, activities for children, digital support sessions and health and wellbeing activities. This programme also provides the opportunity for all Platform colleagues to get involved in local activities to bring colleagues from a range of team into closer contact with our customers and better understand our communities.
- Our Community Conversations Roadshows - to meet with customers locally to discuss the ways they can get involved and feedback and shape services and to provide opportunities for other Platform teams to meet customers in their community to discuss the services we provide.
- Ad-hoc and bespoke activities led by our patch-based Community Engagement Officers.

The activities that we deliver locally will be informed by insight from our communities, including feedback from customers and other sources of community data, to increase the positive impact and social value from these activities.

5. Equality and Diversity

- 5.1 We are committed to fairness and equality for all regardless of their age, disability, gender reassignment, marital or civil partnership status, pregnancy or maternity, race, religion or belief, sex or sexual orientation as referred to in our relevant Group policies. Our aim is to ensure that our policies and procedures comply with our legal duties and do not unlawfully discriminate, either directly or indirectly, and adjustments which are reasonable, in law, may be made to the policy to where required.
- 5.2 Equality and data protection impact assessments have been undertaken in respect of this policy and which identified no negative impact on any person or group with a protected characteristic as a result of this policy.

6. Complaints

- 6.1 The Group aims to meet the needs of its customers by providing an excellent service. However, it is acknowledged that occasionally things go wrong and customers may wish to complain. Should the need arise to make a complaint, please refer to the Group's Complaints, Comments and Compliments Policy.

7. Monitoring and Review

- 7.1 This policy will be reviewed every three years or on the introduction of new legislation, best practice guidelines or required operational changes, whichever is the sooner.
- 7.2 Approved documents are valid for use after their approval date and remain in force beyond any expiry of their review date until a new version is available.

8. Associated Documents

- 8.1 List of documents - associated policies, procedures and publications:
- Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Policy
 - Hate Crime Policy
 - Neighbourhood Management Policy
 - Travel and Expenses Policy
 - Volunteering Policy
 - Customer and Community Engagement Strategy
 - Customer Experience Strategy
 - The Charter for Social Housing Residents: Social Housing White Paper 2020
 - Better Social Housing Review 2022
 - Localism Act 2011
 - Social Housing (Regulation) Act 2023

Author:	Gem Murphy
Document type:	Policy
Version 2:	Final
Version 2 Approved by: Approved date: Release date:	Executive Risk Committee 07/12/2023 10/01/2024
Version 1 Approved by: Approved date: Release date:	Risk & Performance Forum 22/07/2020 06/08/2020
Customer Voice Panel:	Yes 02/11/2023
Next review date:	12/2026
DPIA completed:	Yes
EIA completed:	Yes