

# Customer Involvement Impact Report

2023/24

united  
welsh



The services we deliver must benefit the changing needs of our customers and communities.

By involving United Welsh residents in how we improve our services and make decisions, we are better placed to remove barriers for people to achieve their ambitions, and bring sustainable change to the places where they live.



This year was the first of United Welsh's Strategy 2023/27.

We started the year with a new Customer Involvement structure in place, so the team is better placed to work with our customers and support them through what continues to be a challenging economic period for Wales and the UK.

### Highlights from this year have included:

- Developing a **new approach to volunteering**; making sure our policies, procedures and support package for volunteers is appropriate and effective
- Securing **£250,000 funding** from the Big Lottery to continue our Working Families service for another year. The service seeks to address the issues caused by poverty
- Introducing a **new approach to customer involvement** across the organisation, delivering training and using data and insight to better understand how customers experience some of our services
- The start of a **new customer community** who will help us to improve our services
- Completing an **audit of our approach** to provide assurance that it was suitable, relevant and appropriate.

**We would like to thank our customers for their support, feedback and involvement during the year. Your input is hugely appreciated and helps us to make changes that matter.**

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# Aims

Our Strategy 2023/27 outlines our commitments for providing great homes and successful services, while making the most of opportunities to support people to be happy and healthy.

## We aim to:

- Improve the experience of our customers by creating and revitalising services that listen to their perspectives and align with their needs
- Adopt user centred design principles throughout the organisation to use our resources efficiently and provide better value.



## Customer outcomes:

- Increase in confidence
- Support with accessing employment opportunities
- Improved health and wellbeing
- A safe place to live

## Organisation outcomes:

- Increase in customer satisfaction
- Increase in satisfaction with complaint handling
- Services provide value for money
- Providing services that work for the customer

## We will measure progress by considering:

- Customer satisfaction with United Welsh services and repairs delivered by Celtic Horizons
- Customer satisfaction with our homes and retrofit work
- Customer satisfaction about how we listen and act on their views
- Monitoring customer complaints about our services
- Monitoring the outcomes of new services, including customer feedback.

# Opportunities for customer involvement

As we continue to build our community of customers to volunteer with us, we are establishing a range of opportunities for customers to be involved in a way that suits them.



## Community Benefits Fund Panel

United Welsh used to provide the Together Fund, which was setup several years ago to support United Welsh residents and local people to make positive changes where they live. It was a Community Benefits fund previously managed by Coalfields Trust.

In 2023, we brought administration of the fund in-house, and we are now forming a grant assessment panel of customers who will oversee and evaluate the incoming applications from community groups.

The final decision for awarding funding will sit with the customer panel, and they will also monitor outcomes of projects and report back to both United Welsh and the wider public.

Panel members will receive training to develop the confidence and expertise needed to evaluate and award or decline applications.

Groups applying to the fund will need to explain how their project will benefit United Welsh communities.

## Customers and Residents Associations

This year we have worked with two groups of customers to form constituted Customers and Residents Associations (C&RA).

Blaen y Cwm and Bryn Aber are both established communities living in older properties. We have supported them to establish C&RAs and we hope to formalise a positive relationship between us as the community landlord, and with customers and residents, so we can co-produce solutions to some of the issues facing the communities. Additionally, these C&RAs will support residents to hold us to account for the services they receive.

# Spotlight on...

## Volunteering

People who volunteer with us bring passion, commitment and a desire to make a difference.

This year, we relaunched our volunteers programme, so our volunteers are more supported and able to be involved in our organisation in a formal way.



**To ensure our volunteers are recognised, supported and celebrated, we have:**

- Created a dedicated Volunteer Coordinator role
- Created a Volunteer Handbook and role profile
- Developed induction training and provided more access to training and personal development opportunities
- Created new volunteer uniforms and lanyards.

To date, we have signed up **56** customers who currently volunteer for United Welsh to the new programme, and we aim to make this **200** by the end of 2024/25.

**"I volunteer as much for myself as I do for the residents. As a single mother and carer I don't have much scope to be able to carry out paid work and I don't get out much. Since starting my volunteering role with United Welsh I have developed a sense of belonging and purpose outside of the normal tasks of being a mother and carer."**

Hayley, Plas Hyfryd volunteer



**"I help with the planting and gardening. As a volunteer, you get so much satisfaction and it makes you realise you're not alone. We all have different skills to offer as volunteers."**

Delwyn, resident and volunteer at Fitzroy Lodge

# Training and employability

Training plays a huge role in enabling customers to get involved with our organisation.

We have re-shaped the training we offer so customers can build their confidence and get to know our teams through sessions such as 'Cooking on a Budget' or 'Money Management' before moving onto learning skills such as:

- Equality and Diversity
- Safeguarding
- Data Protection and GDPR
- Customer Researcher Skills
- Introduction to Volunteering
- Communications – influencing and persuasion skills
- Team working
- Assertiveness

## Live Life to the Full

Live Life to the Full is our confidence-building course, and is a starting place for many customers to step into training with us.

This year:

- **21** customers engaged with the programme
- **100%** of participants enjoyed the course and felt that they learnt new skills
- Over **50%** of participants are interested in more training
- **Five** of the 21 have signed up to be a volunteer
- **Six** have been referred for employment support.



After skills training, customers have gone on to find employment by working with our Employability Mentor.

- **22** customers were supported into employment
- **69** customers obtained training accreditations
- Customers reported that **44** barriers had been removed for them to get into work and training.



## Steven\*

United Welsh's Money Advice team referred Steven to work with the Customer Involvement team as he was in rent arrears and needed support to find a new job.

Steven had worked most of his life within the steel industry, although recently he was struggling to get a job due to the heavy job losses within the industry.

He had recently taken on a temporary role within a manufacturing company but had to quit the role due to the physical nature. For this, he was sanctioned by the Job Centre for quitting, so had little money to live on.

We reviewed his CV and recognised that he needed qualifications to back up his experience.

We supported him to complete his Forklift License and he has now found full-time permanent employment with Pelsis as a Machine Operator.

**“I was pleased to get my licences with counterbalance and reach forklift trucks.**

**This was made possible by Peter Watkins; he was very quick to get me booked onto a course and by doing so it has helped me secure full-time employment. I am truly grateful for the help Peter has given me.”**

\*Name changed to protect identity



## Customer Experience Researchers

Last year, our Customer Involvement team and a group of colleagues did training about User-Centered Research and Service Design, so that we are better able to engage customers in service design and research.

This is helping us to gain customer insight and understanding customer experiences, rather than assuming.

Holding open and honest conversations with our customers helps us to understand their pain points and where we need to improve. We have appointed a Customer Experience Researcher to lead on this area, and part of their role is to establish a team of customers who will carry out research on our behalf.

This team will be fully trained in commercial research skills and user centred design. The first service areas they will review are the re-let of empty homes, and experiences of damp and mould repairs.



# Customer satisfaction with their involvement

We work with research provider Acuity to seek customer feedback.

Every month, a randomly selected pool of customers is telephoned and invited to take part in a confidential interview. The survey is designed to collect the views of approximately 75 customers per month (225 per quarter) – a total of 900 annually, proportionately sampled by tenure and area.

In 2023/24, 916 surveys were completed. This total is high enough to conclude that the findings are accurate to within  $\pm 2.9\%$  annually.

85% of customers consented to having their responses shared with United Welsh, and 97% of these customers are happy for United Welsh to contact them to discuss any issues they raised.

## Acuity commented:

**“Satisfaction with the services provided by United Welsh is generally high, with 82% of customers satisfied with the overall service provided.**

**“Satisfaction rates are highest for being provided with a home that is safe and secure (88%), and with the value for money of the rent (86%). Satisfaction is also high with the neighbourhood as a place to live (84%), the overall quality of the home and that United Welsh is easy to deal with (both at 83%).**

**“More than three quarters of customers are satisfied with the repairs and maintenance service (77%) and 72% agree that they trust United Welsh.**

**“However, the remaining measures have satisfaction rates of 70% or below, with the lowest for having a say in managing services (67%), dealing with anti-social behaviour and the value for money of the service charges (both at 68%). The report shows that generally, satisfaction rates have improved since last year.”**

The four key metrics relevant to customer involvement are all areas where we would like to see some improvement.

These are:

- Listens and acts
- Participate in decision making
- Have a say in how services are managed
- Trust.

## Key metrics summary

-  **83%** Quality of home
-  **88%** Safe and secure
-  **83%** Repairs and maintenance
-  **68%** Anti-social behaviour
-  **83%** Easy to deal with
-  **70%** Listens and acts
-  **70%** Participate in decision making
-  **83%** Neighbourhood as a place to live
-  **67%** Say in how services managed
-  **72%** Trust
-  **86%** Rent - value for money
-  **68%** Service charge - value for money

## Areas for improvement

Communication and information issues, alongside customer care, featured widely in comments for the survey's open-ended questions. This suggests that customers believe there is still room for improvement in these areas.

Improving communication and information-sharing may also improve satisfaction scores across services such as repairs and maintenance, where communicating progress and explaining processes more clearly will help to reassure customers that their issues are being addressed.

Promoting opportunities for customers to be more involved in the work of United Welsh may also give more customers insight into how services are delivered, including the issues and choices that community landlords face.

## Benchmarking with other community landlords in Wales

Overall, 11 of the 12 customer satisfaction measures for United Welsh are above the Welsh median. 'Trust' was lower, placing in the third quartile when compared to other Welsh landlords.



# Measuring customer experience

This year we have progressed work in specific service areas to help us understand how our customers experience the service, so we can make targeted improvements in future.

## Lettings Survey

We have created a new survey to determine how satisfied customers are with their experience of moving into a United Welsh home.

This includes the information they received while waiting to move in, and the move-in process itself.

The survey will be issued to all customers 30 days after they move in, and will be rolled out in 2024/25.

## Rent, service charges and the cost of living

Each year, United Welsh reviews the rent and services we charge for, as typically the costs of buildings and services increases annually.

The review includes a consultation with our customers. They help us to consider how affordable our rent is, how well understood the rent calculation process is and how rental income is spent, and whether rent provides value for money.

For the past two years, we have expanded our consultation to help us to better understand our customers' lived experiences of the day-to-day high cost of living, and any impact it was having on their mental and physical health.

468 customers responded to the survey. The results informed our 2024-25 rent setting discussions and decision, and provided key insights into how customers are being affected by living costs, including which customers are in most need.

This has helped us to start reshaping our community development offer and our Working Families project services to support those most disadvantaged.

## New-build homes

We are developing a comprehensive survey for all customers who have moved into a new-build home. The purpose is to use customers' feedback and experience to feed into the design of new homes and estates, so we can identify any themes with "snagging issues" (property imperfections) within the defect period.

The survey will be issued to customers 11 months after their move-in date and will be rolled out in 2024-25.



# Spotlight on...

## Living Well review

Living Well is part of United Welsh's Thrive service, providing homes and services for people aged over 55 living in apartments, bungalows, sheltered accommodation and extra care facilities across South Wales.

**A project team including Housing Coordinators and colleagues from across United Welsh undertook substantial customer research to answer three key questions:**

- What does the Living Well service look like to customers?
- What is important to them?
- How could the service be developed in the future?'

A series of interviews were conducted with randomly selected customers.

**The areas identified as most important to customers were:**

- Feeling safe and secure
- Being part of a community
- Feeling supported
- Communicating with us in a variety of ways
- Meeting needs, now and in future.

This information will now feed into a holistic review of the Living Well service, and we will continue to work with customers to identify improvements and test solutions.



# Improving services

Making improvements to our processes and data to deliver successful services is integral to our Strategy 2023/27.



## Standards for re-letting homes

In October 2023, Welsh Government introduced the highly anticipated new iteration of the Welsh Housing Quality Standard (WHQS). The standard exists to make sure that all homes owned by housing associations and councils are maintained to a high standard and kept in good condition.

A key change within the standard was the requirement for all habitable rooms, staircases and landings located within homes to have suitable floor coverings before they are re-let.

We surveyed customers to help us to understand what they think of our current re-let standards, and to gain insights into how we can improve the standard of homes for re-let in future.

## Our key findings were:

- Communication could have been better during the allocation process
- Some customers felt pressured to move in, regardless of the standard of the home
- The quality of decoration needs to be improved in older properties
- Flooring was identified as very important for physical health, mental health and wellbeing
- Carpet was the preferred flooring, along with laminate.
- Customers were happy to be out of temporary accommodation.

This information is now feeding into our re-lettings project to improve the customer experience and meet new requirements under WHQS.

## Monitoring the diversity of customers

While we aim to collect diversity information about customers at the start of their contract, the data held against our current customers has changed over time and has been a challenge to maintain.

To address this gap, we will be moving our customer data to Venue, a new database held in Microsoft Dynamics 365 which allows for more accurate data capture, storage and reporting. This will help us to better shape our services to meet the diverse needs of our customers.

In the interim, we have been:

- Capturing EDI data for all new rent contracts
- Completing customer censuses for all community-based projects to tailor solutions at a local level
- Using Community Insight, a tool which provides local data on customers to understand the overarching diversity themes within the communities we serve.

## Community Benefits review

In 2023, we created and hired for a new Community Benefits Coordinator role.

This will help us to maximise opportunities for residents to gain employment and training within our housing development supply chain, and improve how we collect and use income for community benefits from development partners.

Our Community Benefit Policy was also reviewed and enhanced.

**A series of small grants have been awarded to support local activities across our communities.**

**These were held at Allerton Street, Melin Gwlan Caerphilly, Park Villas, Garth Oak Terrace and Dawn Villa, Maria Court and Tirphil.**



# Local activities

We are an active presence in several of our communities. We encourage residents to get involved with local activities and join new groups or panels. Here are some examples.

## Llanbradach

Following a consultation with residents at Braithwaite Close and Llys Cambria in Llanbradach, Caerphilly, estate improvement plans are being developed, which will include new fencing and washing areas. We are also working with Caerphilly Council to deliver activities for young people over the holiday period to reduce low level ASB.

## Forgeside

Forgeside is a community in the Torfaen region. We have been working in partnership with Torfaen Voluntary Alliance (TVA) and Torfaen Council to build stronger links between the Forgeside Community Centre and local people.

The Community Centre was previously closed due to low use and high running costs. We wanted to understand the reasons behind the centre not being used and what needed to change.

In August 2023, we held a community drop-in to gather feedback from families about the issues they are facing, and the lack of engagement with the centre.

Next, we will develop a working group to hold activities and initiatives that hopefully alleviate the effects on the cost-of-living crisis that people reported.

## Llys Nant y Mynydd

Llys Nant Y Mynydd is an extra care scheme providing homes for older people in Nantyglo, Blaenau Gwent.

Most social activities at the scheme are attended by women, despite several men reporting that they felt lonely and isolated.

As a result, we started a weekly Men's Group, led by male residents. A group of between five to eight men meet up to play pool and darts, and to have a cuppa and a chat. It offers great peer-to-peer support in an environment the men feel comfortable and relaxed in.



## Sponsorship of the Caerphilly Dragons Under 10's Girls Football Team

Caerphilly Dragons are a grassroots football club who work hard to engage girls and women into sports. They approached us to sponsor their under 10's team, which is made up of girls from five schools across Caerphilly where lots of United Welsh homes are based.

**“They’re a brilliant little team and they now look really smart, it was so cold recently they were actually playing in their big coats.**

**It’s so lovely to see them now as a team, even at this young age. It’s not only bringing together friends, but friends of friends. You can see the fabric of a community starting to knit together already.”**

Lesley Bevan, player  
Georgie’s mum

## Annual Santa Run

This activity is an annual tradition at United Welsh! Santa borrows our community van and travels to as many of our areas as possible in the weeks leading up to Christmas.

Santa’s efforts are always well received by children and parents at a time where many of our children may not get taken to a local Santa due to travelling or costs. This is the only opportunity many of them might get to meet the big man himself. It is a wonderful activity to be part of and we know how much it is appreciated by our communities.



This year, Santa travelled to 33 of our communities spread across South Wales, and delivered presents to over 300 children who came out to meet him.

We also held Christmas decorating competitions and received donations of soft toys from the Cardiff Devils Ice Hockey team. These were donated to Min Y Coed, a new apartment building for families at risk of homelessness.





## Looking ahead to 2024/25

Over the last year, we have spent a lot of time working with customers and volunteers to develop our approach to customer involvement.

Along with our overall aims to improve customers' experiences of our services, and continuing to embed our customer involvement approach across the organisation, we are concentrating on:

- Ensuring customers know how to get involved with us
- Ensuring customers are involved in strategic decisions
- Understanding our customers
- Maximising community benefits.

We recognise that involving customers in strategic decision-making is an area of improvement for us.

For customers to influence these decisions at the right time, in the right way, we are introducing the following improvements in 2024/25:

- A formalised planner and tracker to plan activities and resources for engagement
- Developing guidance on what can be achieved through effective engagement and how it can be done. This will include procedural guidance to support colleagues and templates to promote consistency
- Defining the roles and responsibilities of who should be carrying out engagement and when
- Developing quality assurance processes and a framework to ensure performance can be monitored, including the impact of engagement, and confirming the reporting requirements at the appropriate levels.

Our work on community benefits will also continue to be a significant area of focus, so we can maximise value for money and measure the social return on investments.





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We **build** homes, **create** communities and **transform** lives