

# **CUSTOMER VOICE AND INFLUENCE STRATEGY 2020-2023**

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# CUSTOMER VOICE AND INFLUENCE STRATEGY

## 1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Good customer engagement has clear benefits. It enables better communication, improved customer experience and satisfaction, better allocation of resources, and value for money. It creates trust and meaningful relationships between tenants, customers and landlords.

1.2 This Strategy focuses on developing Stockport Homes' aims to be accountable to customers, reduce inequalities and build strong, collaborative relationships through developing inclusive, modern and insightful engagement that places customer influence at the forefront of business planning.

1.3 It builds on the achievements of the Customer and Community Engagement Strategy 2018-2021, which focused on expanding Stockport Homes' role in the community. Key successes from this Strategy include:

- The Edgeley Community Partnership project, which successfully connected residents with local partners and services, with the approach further developed and later rolled out to the Lancashire Hill and Mottram Street neighbourhoods.
- Development of dementia friendly activities and an intergenerational choir.
- Provision of youth diversionary activities and holiday hunger initiatives funded through a successful £500,000 Reaching Communities partnership bid.
- A dynamic programme of mental toughness and resilience sessions delivered in schools;
- Increased usage of Stockport Homes' managed Community Buildings; and
- An award-winning Scrutiny function, with the Customer Scrutiny Panel achieving the highest score possible in Quality Assured Scrutiny<sup>1</sup> accreditation.

1.4 This Strategy aims to strengthen Stockport Homes' established engagement structures and strong community foundations through developing opportunities to capture the customer voice across the broadest cross section of SHG's customer base. This will be achieved by using more flexible approaches, embracing technology and better utilising customer insight to evidence clearly how customers influence service design and delivery.

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<sup>1</sup> Quality Assured Scrutiny is a quality framework and accreditation scheme delivered in partnership with TPAS, CIH and Housemark.

## 2 CONTEXT

### 2.1 National Context

There are several national and regional frameworks governing and guiding customer engagement, as set out below.

#### Regulatory Framework

The Regulator for Social Housing (RSH) sets out statutory requirements for social housing providers, including economic and consumer standards. The Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard (2017) forms part of the consumer standards, which include providing a wide range of opportunities for tenants to influence and be involved in the formulation of their landlord's housing-related strategic priorities, decision-making, and scrutiny.

#### National Policy

Following the publication of Dame Judith Hackitt's 'Building a Safer Future: Independent Review of Building Regulations and Fire Safety' (May 2018), the Government developed proposals to ensure high-rise residential buildings are safe places to live and residents' voices are heard. The proposals put residents at the heart of a new regulatory system, with better access to information about their building and more of a say over decisions made about the fire and structural safety of their building.

In August 2018, the Government released the Social Housing Green Paper (SHGP): 'A New Deal for Social Housing', bringing a renewed focus on the importance of empowering and listening to tenants across the sector. The SHGP aims to rebalance the relationship between tenants and landlords by empowering residents and strengthening the regulator, tackling stigma, and celebrating thriving communities. The Conservative Manifesto in December 2019 set out plans for a White Paper, anticipated in 2020 but awaiting further announcements, which will set out further measures to empower tenants, including measures to provide greater redress, better regulation and improve the quality of social housing.

#### Together with Tenants

The National Housing Federation's Together with Tenants (TwT) initiative seeks to strengthen the relationship between tenants and landlords, and to create standards for consistency across the sector in what tenants can and should expect from their landlord. During 2019, Stockport Homes became an 'early adopter' of TwT, contributing to the research study and testing the emerging principles through a comprehensive review of service standards which clearly evidence to customers how we are already meeting and exceeding the proposed standards. The TwT consultation period closed in February 2020, with a wider national roll out of the resulting Tenants' Plan and Charter expected later in 2020 along with a revised Code of Governance.

#### Tpas – The Tenant Engagement Experts

Tpas is a not-for-profit organisation dedicated to improving tenant involvement and empowerment across the country through working with residents, landlords, and contractors to promote, support and champion tenant involvement. Tpas support over 200 Housing Associations, Local Authorities, resident groups and contractors covering over 2.5 million homes. In February 2020, Tpas published a redefined set of national standards for engagement that highlighted the need for better transparency, openness and accountability between tenant and landlord and reflect the renewed importance of the resident's voice.

## 2.2 Regional Context

Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) comprises ten Greater Manchester councils and the Mayor, who work with other local services, businesses, communities and other partners to improve the city-region. Collectively, the GMCA has created the 'Our People, Our Place' Strategy and accompanying Business Plan for Greater Manchester which sets out a vision for 'a place where all voices are heard and where, working together, we can shape our future'.

Greater Manchester Housing Providers (GMHP) is a partnership made up of housing associations and ALMOs across the city region who support the aims of the GMCA and the Greater Manchester Health and Social Care Partnership. The partnership is working to deliver a range of themes and outcomes including a specific 'Tenants Voice' workstream with the remit to ensure tenants across Greater Manchester have a voice in its developments. Stockport Homes is a key member, with the Chief Executive being the Vice-Chair and representation on each of the workstreams.

## 2.3 Local Context

Although Stockport is one of the least deprived boroughs in Greater Manchester, it is also characterised by pockets of areas which are experiencing relatively high levels of multiple deprivation, primarily concentrated in neighbourhoods with high concentrations of social housing stock. Stockport's deprivation has increased over time, with a 6% shift in ranking in relative terms in the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) 2015 to IMD 2019<sup>2</sup>. The top three areas in Stockport for deprivation are in the top 0.3% most deprived in the country and three quarters (76%) of all households in these areas are living in an SHG managed property.

Engaging with communities with higher levels of poor health, high unemployment, lower income and poorer levels of literacy is historically more challenging with formal methods of engagement, such as meetings, traditionally presenting a barrier to involvement. Adopting modern, inclusive and informal methods to capture the customer voice, utilising customer insight and exploring in depth those that do not engage will open-up opportunities for customer influence.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/english-indices-of-deprivation-2019>

Stockport Homes are a partner in 'One Stockport' an initiative conceived by Stockport Council to be supported by, and delivered in partnership with, representatives from the local community. One Stockport aims to 'build back better' by supporting people through the recovery from the Coronavirus pandemic and harnessing the new-found sense of community borne from the response, creating a more sustainable future for everyone by connecting communities, promoting health and wellbeing and supporting local businesses. This will be achieved primarily through the established 'Team Around the Place' (TAP) partnerships, which bring together local public services and strengthen the relationship with our diverse communities by building connections, understanding what is needed and breaking down barriers to support.

TAP enables people to engage in and contribute to peer support and voluntary activities and so improve individual and community capacity, wellbeing and resilience. Stockport Homes are a key partner in TAP and the lead for the Stepping Hill area. TAP has a fundamental role in One Stockport in identifying and supporting those who need help during the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath. This provides a unique opportunity to learn from communities what is needed and how to better empower people whilst increasing collaboration between services and reducing duplication.

### **3 STOCKPORT HOMES' APPROACH**

3.1 SHG has a proven track record of delivering excellent services to its customers and within its neighbourhoods. Effective customer engagement in decision making and shaping service delivery is fundamental to the organisation realising its Mission and Aims:

Group Mission:

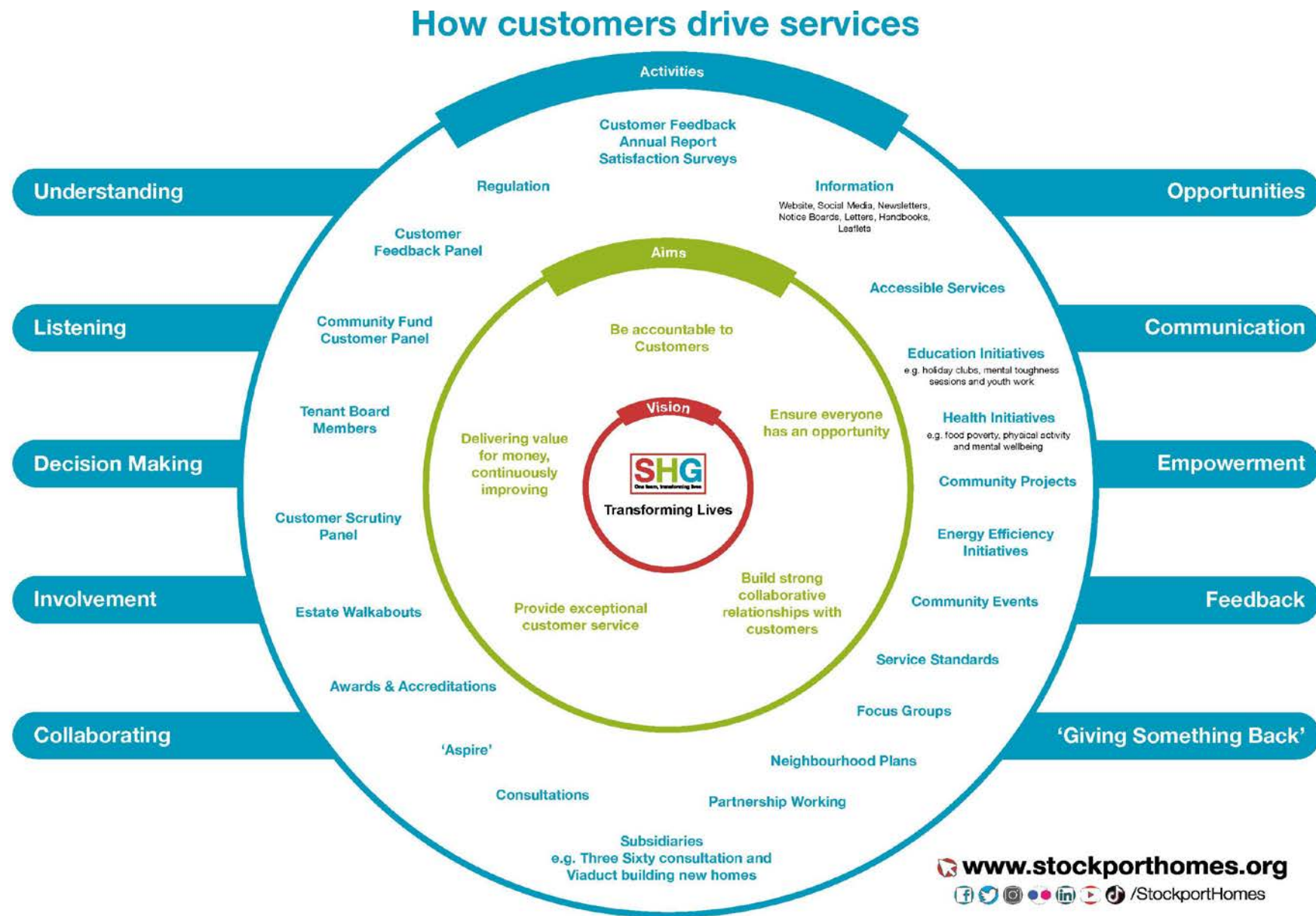
'One team, transforming lives'

Group Aims:

- Be a great place to work
- Be accountable to customers
- Maximise efficiency
- Reduce inequalities
- Build strong, collaborative relationships
- Improve the environment

3.2 Customer engagement at Stockport Homes is well established and resourced with many ways that customers can influence services. Figure 1 overleaf illustrates how customers drive services, many of which are long standing, and intrinsically linked to the successful delivery of the Mission and Aims.

Figure 1



## 4 CONSULTATION

4.1 In 2019, Stockport Homes completed an assessment with Tpas against the National Tenant Engagement Standards, which included a desktop review, site visits, staff interviews and customer focus groups. The assessment identified areas of strength and areas for improvement in Stockport Homes' engagement approach. The findings from the assessment have been reviewed in line with the revised National Standards for Engagement and form the basis of this Strategy's action plan.

4.2 To ensure engagement at Stockport Homes is effectively resourced, inclusive, transparent and accountable an Engagement Partner approach has been developed in consultation with the Staff Voice Group, Managers Forum and Wider Leadership Team, which links a staff member within the Customer Engagement and Inclusion Team with each service area. Engagement partners meet with service leads twice yearly as a minimum to identify opportunities to inform, involve, consult, collaborate and empower customers in decision making and to ensure clear links to SHG's vision, values and business plans. The partnering approach facilitates a comprehensive overview of engagement activities and plans, enabling efficiencies by identifying opportunities for 'joined up' working and avoiding consultation fatigue.

4.3 In addition, customer insight is gathered on an ongoing basis via complaints and compliments, satisfaction surveys, and day to day feedback from customers. Further information has been gathered through extensive telephone surveys asking over 1300 customers their views on services, communication and opportunities to influence and make decisions. This has enabled customers that wouldn't usually engage with formal consultation to influence service design and delivery. Good communication, being kept informed and access to clear and timely information emerged strongly as a theme in the feedback from customers.

4.4 Consultation workshops with the Board and Stockport Home's Customer Scrutiny Panel identified customer insight, developing inclusive and digital methods, clear and accessible information and timely feedback as priorities, which are reflected in the Strategic Objectives and accompanying action plan.

## 5 STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES

Five objectives have been created to deliver the Customer Voice and Influence Strategy. These are based on:

- Customer insight and feedback
- Recommendations from the TPAS review of engagement at Stockport Homes
- Emerging new standards and regulatory requirements

- National research including Together with Tenants and Tpas' National Engagement Survey findings
- Engagement partner conversations with service leads

## **OBJECTIVE ONE: AMPLIFYING THE CUSTOMER VOICE AND VALUE OF ENGAGEMENT**

5.1 Stockport Homes' aim is to strengthen the links between engagement and business planning, ensuring the customer voice is listened to and clearly visible in all strategic planning and decision making. Where engagement is understood and valued by all staff, this will underpin the creation of more opportunities for customers to be involved in grass roots decision-making and collaboration. Internally, involvement will be strengthened to ensure responsibility for engagement is valued as part of everyone's role and there is robustly evidenced accountability for engagement throughout the organisation.

Taking action to challenge negative perceptions of social housing will also contribute to nurturing a culture of trust and respect.

### **Objective One Actions:**

- Review Governance procedures, such as cover reports, to bring the customer voice to the forefront of reports to Board.
- Introduce cross-service engagement champions to embed customer influence in every service.
- Embed engagement in recruitment, induction, training and values conversations so all staff understand meaningful engagement and the benefits it can bring to the organisation, residents and the wider community.
- Demonstrate a commitment to the 'See the Person' campaign<sup>3</sup> and tackling stigma in social housing.
- Achieve Tpas engagement accreditation.

**Objective One Outcome:** A deeper understanding of the value of engagement leads to more opportunities for meaningful involvement and increased confidence that decision making is based on sound and representative customer insight and feedback.

## **OBJECTIVE TWO: MODERNISING STRATEGIC ENGAGEMENT**

5.2 Stockport Homes has a strong history of involving customers in the Governance of the organisation. The Board has three customer members involved in setting the strategic direction of the organisation and a well-established scrutiny function.

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<sup>3</sup> See the Person is the name for the campaign led and organised by social housing tenants and staff to help combat the stigma associated with those who live in social housing.



5.3 Stockport Homes' utilise the principles of participatory budgeting to encourage community involvement in helping to support local projects from the Community Fund budget. A customer panel oversee the fund and make the final decisions on spend, enabling community ownership of the allocation of funds.

5.4 This objective focuses on developing modern methods to ensure all customers can be involved in influencing strategic plans and decisions.

#### **Objective Two Actions:**

- Develop engagement opportunities that address gaps in the accountability framework.
- Review Board recruitment procedures and develop new innovative opportunities to participate to attract a diverse membership that represents Stockport Homes' customer profile.
- Review scrutiny methods to offer inclusive more flexible options for customers to influence reviews.
- Develop opportunities for customers to be involved in challenging service performance and standards at a local level, with clear links to scrutiny, for example mystery shoppers, tenant inspectors and online methods.
- Create opportunities for customers to be meaningfully involved in the procurement of new contracts and services, linked to the social value element of the Value for Money Strategy.
- Collaborate with customers to establish diversity networks around key themes including disability, BAME and LGBTQ+ customers, including signing up to and delivering the requirements of the Houseproud Pledge.

**Objective Two Outcome:** A modern engagement framework that provides a comprehensive range of inclusive opportunities to capture a broad and diverse range of views. Increased opportunities for customers to be empowered in decision making.

### **OBJECTIVE THREE: WIDER COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**

5.5 Stockport Homes' have a well-resourced and successful community development approach, with several community projects receiving national recognition and highlighted as best practice in the Tpas assessment.

5.6 Civil society refers to the space for collective action linked by shared interests, purposes and values and collective activity. SHG provides a wide range of support to the wider civil society sector in Stockport, which includes a vast range of registered charities, exempt charities, community benefit societies, Community Interest Companies and unincorporated voluntary associations. Stockport Homes directly supports civil society in Stockport through a dedicated Funding Officer, with regular contact with over 133 groups in local neighbourhoods.

5.7 Community engagement can help neighbours get to know one another and build a sense of community as well as a sense of ownership and pride in their neighbourhood. Targeted work with people who may experience disadvantage such as people with disabilities, from BAME communities, those with complex needs, and young people is vital in building strong, inclusive communities and reducing inequalities.

5.8 This Strategy aims to build on our successes to further strengthen engagement in our communities and to tap into all opportunities to hear and act upon the customer voice in our neighbourhoods, collaborating with residents to create positive change and share and celebrate successes.

### **Objective Three Actions:**

- Embed the 'LIFE' model approach to support for groups across community development projects. LIFE (Lead, Influence, Follow and Exit) is the process used by the Funding Officer to support civil society groups to learn, grow and develop. Groups can enter LIFE at any stage and work their way through the different levels of support until they eventually become less reliant on support.
- Develop annual Neighbourhood Plans based on customer insight and feedback from a wide range of sources.
- Develop a framework to measure the outcomes and impact of community working to the local community, for example, a social auditing approach.
- Seek opportunities to support Stockport Council and other local partners and networks with community-based work, with a focus on diverse groups, such as Stockport Pride, Nexus and Disability Stockport, working towards a more inclusive community.
- Develop a clear approach to engaging with younger customers through, for example, links to GM Youth Panel, schools, youth work and digital platforms to ensure young people influence services.

**Objective Three Outcome:** A consistent approach to demonstrating the value of community work. Targeted work captures a diverse and more representative customer voice in decision making.

## **OBJECTIVE FOUR: INFORMATION, INSIGHT AND DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT**

5.9 Stockport Homes' Digital Transformation Strategy has clear links to this Strategy. Underpinning the approach to service improvement and accountability is the recognition that every interaction with a customer counts and is recognised as part of intelligence gathering. The re-procurement of the housing management system will provide a central place to store information that can be accessed easily and efficiently and ensure customers only have to 'tell us once'.

5.10 Similarly, developing a digital engagement platform and online methods to enable customers to opt in to participate at a time and level of their choosing will broaden options for participation, whilst utilising digital methods,

such as live streaming meetings, You Tube, What's App and Facebook groups etc. will enable more customers to engage and develop opportunities to capture feedback and insight.

#### **Objective Four Actions:**

- Develop modern digital methods for engagement to widen opportunities for involvement and gather insight, including an online engagement platform, social media groups, live question and answer sessions and streaming meetings.
- Gather intelligence through our data systems to target customers who do not access our services to understand a broader range of views.
- Review our information contact points, such as the website, in collaboration with customers to ensure useful information on key areas is easy to find including how to get involved, complaints, performance and the impact from engagement activities.
- Ensure customers have reviewed key information and communications to ensure it is written in plain English, accessible and easy to understand.
- Identifying opportunities to apply customer journey mapping methodology to better understand service provision from customers' experiences.

**Objective Four Outcome:** Modern and digital methods enable more representative engagement and insights. Customers can access key information clearly and easily leading to greater satisfaction.

### **OBJECTIVE FIVE: ACCOUNTABILITY AND BUILDING SAFETY**

5.11 Stockport Homes' have taken a proactive approach to meeting and exceeding regulatory requirements for building safety. This includes becoming an early adopter for the Ministry for Housing Communities and Local Government's (MHCLG) consultation into effective communication with residents about fire safety information and extensive consultation with residents in high-rise blocks has informed this research. A multi-team working group has already been established to oversee the development and further implementation of this work.

5.12 The Hackitt Review report into building safety standards and the subsequent Reforming Building Safety Systems document published by the Government in 2020 adopts a requirement for a Resident Engagement Strategy for building safety, setting out how residents will be informed and engaged in decision making. SHG recognise and welcome the new opportunities presented for strengthening engagement with, and accountability to, customers in high-rise blocks.

5.13 More widely, the Tpas assessment of engagement identified opportunities to improve communication with customers through providing consistent 'you said, we did' feedback, more clearly and robustly evidencing to customers the positive impact of listening, learning and change.

### **Objective Five Actions:**

- Develop a Strategy for Engaging Residents in Building Safety including the formation of a high-rise resident's network that actively captures the views of the diverse profile of customers living in the blocks in ways that meet individual needs.
- Develop a clear, consistent and inclusive feedback method for reporting to customers and staff how customers views have been considered in all engagement activities and to regularly promote the impact made.
- Provide opportunities for customers to be informed of and engaged in the continuous learning and development from complaints.

**Objective Five Outcomes:** All new regulatory requirements are met and clearly communicated to customers leading to increased customer confidence in the safety of their home. Customers consistently see how their involvement leads to positive change which builds trust and respect.

## **6 EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT (EIA)**

6.1 An EIA assessment has been undertaken. This highlighted Equality and Diversity in procurement as an area for further development. SHG must work with contractors who demonstrate that they are progressive in their thinking and staff values in relation to E&D principles and social value. This has been acknowledged in Objective Two.

6.2 The EIA also identified under representation in SHG engagement structures. Ensuring thorough consideration is given to understanding our diverse customer profile, through targeted engagement approaches and inclusive communications that meet customers' needs has also been emphasised in the objectives for community engagement, information and insight and accountability.

## **7 LINKS TO STRATEGIES AND POLICIES**

7.1 This Strategy links to several other SHG Strategies and Policies:

- Customer Access Strategy
- Customer Expenses Policy
- Customer Feedback Policy
- Delivery Plan
- Digital Transformation Strategy
- Equality and Diversity Strategy
- Funding Strategy
- Inclusive Growth Strategy
- Marketing and Communications Strategy
- Value for Money Strategy
- Age Friendly Strategy

7.2 It is also linked to Stockport Council Strategies around Place Based Integration, Local Plans, and All Age Living.

## **8 ACTION PLAN**

8.1 All actions within this Strategy have been developed into an action plan attached at Appendix Two.

## **9 OWNERSHIP, MONITORING AND REVIEW**

9.1 The Strategy will be monitored by staff Engagement Champions and customers who opt in to join the engagement platform. An annual impact assessment will be reported to Operations Committee and customers, highlighting outcomes and achievements.