

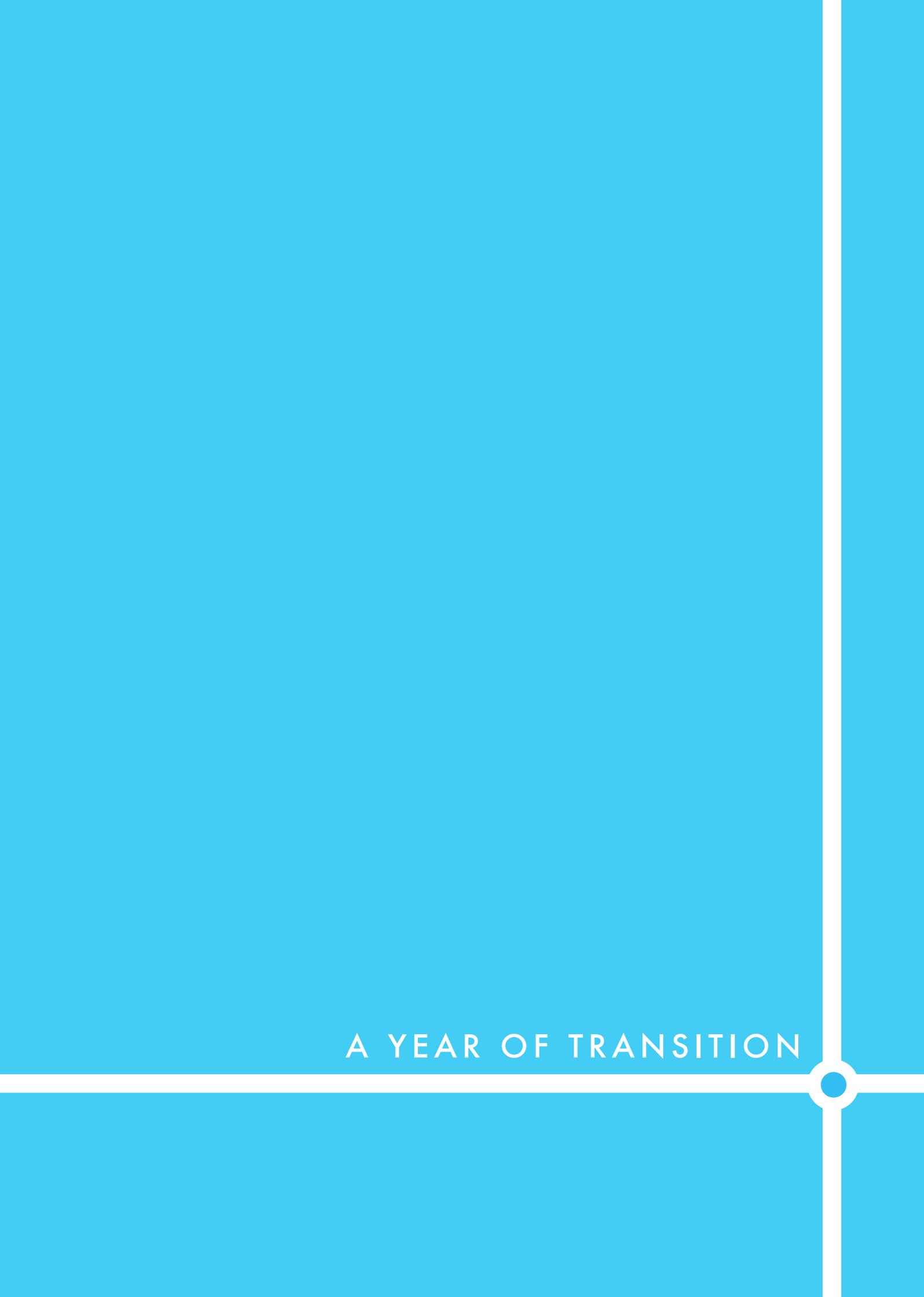
# ANNUAL REPORT

TWENTYTWENTYONE



ALMOND  
  
HOUSING ASSOCIATION

A YEAR OF TRANSITION





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## CHAIRMAN'S REPORT...

In last year's Annual Report, I inevitably reflected on the emerging impact of Covid-19. Since then there have been vast changes for both our customers and our colleagues alike, with the continuing lockdown restrictions from Westminster and Holyrood resulting in a limited ability to deliver our services, face-to-face contact becoming minimal and colleagues adjusting to working from home.



During this time, Almond HA has experienced the start of an intensive period of transformation, with the retirement of our founding Chief Executive, George Webster, after 26 years of service and the introduction of John Davidson as the new CEO of the Association. The restrictions put in place by the Scottish Government meant that George retired at a time when colleagues and customers didn't have a chance to pass on their good wishes in person and, likewise, John started in very unusual circumstances where his opportunity to meet colleagues in the organisation was severely limited.

Although the restrictions brought many challenges, they also forced us to think in new and creative ways about the work that we do and the services which we offer, and this has moved us forward as an Association. We used the digital tools available to have a virtual send-off for George and to host a welcome meeting for John. This shift to digital has not only benefited the Board and fellow Almond HA colleagues, but it has also allowed us to connect with customers in a new and exciting way – something that we'll be looking to build on further as we start to shape what our future will look like.

As we closed the office to the public in March 2020, Almond HA colleagues and Board members came together immediately to consider how we would continue to provide excellent customer service without the face-to-face interaction we were used to. We knew that some of our customers appreciated dropping into the office and we were aware that many didn't have access to digital devices. Taking all of this into account, we prioritised upgrading our telephone system to one that suited the needs of the Association and we worked with community groups to provide digital devices to those most in need.

With a shift in how we communicate with customers, colleagues and Board members, the past year has also taught us that there are many different and new ways to approach the delivery of our services. This has resulted in a transition period which is reflected throughout this Annual Report.

Overall, I believe our customers, colleagues and Board members have responded positively to the difficult year we have all experienced. There have been worrying times for many of us and the commitment and comradery is something we should all be proud of. Our customers have been understanding of the limitations on our services during various lockdowns and our colleagues have worked hard to make up for lost time during the initial, and subsequent, lockdowns. By working together, this has allowed us all to move forward and continue to provide the quality services which Almond HA is known for.

Finally, it seems fitting that during this time of transition I conclude my current term as Chair of the Board in line with my original commitment. I intend to remain as a Board member, supporting Almond HA as it continues its transitional journey, and I'm looking forward to supporting the new Chair in leading the Association through this next exciting phase.

My best wishes to each and every one of you.

A handwritten signature in white ink that reads "Martin Joyce". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Martin Joyce

## FROM ONE CEO TO ANOTHER...

Commencing in post as the new Chief Executive in September 2020, I have personally known Almond HA largely from a 'remote' working perspective. Whilst this has inevitably presented the kind of challenges which we have all been facing since March 2020, it has also presented new opportunities, as well as demonstrating great determination, resilience and innovation from both customers and colleagues.



Last year, George Webster reflected on his time leading the organisation. Back in 1994, George set up Almond HA from scratch and when he retired in 2020, he left a legacy that will remain in Almond HA – to put customers at the heart of every decision we make. George took Almond HA through a variety of challenges, from setting up the Association, succeeding in the all-important ballot, converting to charitable status, and developing the Association to have a reputation for high performance and high engagement with our customers. Such impressive leadership supported by the work of Board members and colleagues over 26 years has fortunately provided a very strong foundation for continued improvement of services to customers who remain central to everything we do.

If 2019/20 was largely a year of reflection, our journey is now one of transition.

I am excited to lead Almond HA into the future, and I've started this by working with colleagues to identify four key improvement projects in 2020/21. These include:

- Improving the information and data we hold on the condition of our properties to ensure that we continue to deliver the required investment to provide customers with a home they can be proud of.
- Investing in technology that enables colleagues to provide excellent customer service on every occasion and to make it easy for customers to access services.
- Increasing our knowledge of our customers and their preferences in terms of how they access our services so that we can deliver a more tailored approach for their individual needs.
- Discussing with colleagues and stakeholders across Almond HA to agree WHAT our key purpose is (Vision) and HOW (Values) we will work together to achieve this.

All of the above projects are aimed at delivering improved customer service and were agreed with the Board during the year. We believe that these improvements will benefit our customers, as we create homes that customers can be proud of, use technology to support our customers, free up time for our colleagues to focus on things which have a greater impact on our communities and provide a positive working culture that our colleagues and customers can take pride in.

As you will see later in the report, we are continuing to perform well across most service areas. This leaves us in a good position to work on improving our customer service outlined above, as well as focusing on delivering great work in the community. As we transition towards a more modern and technology enabled way of working, we will be looking at further opportunities for increasing our community work and considering how we may be able to have even greater impact on the wellbeing of the communities in which we operate.

None of the above, of course, is possible without the hard work, support and determination of colleagues and Board members and I have been struck by the passion of both parties for making Almond HA even better, both as a community landlord and as a place to work. I would also like to express thanks to the various partners with whom we work who have also demonstrated similar positive approaches ensuring that we have continued to deliver key services.

We are determined and excited to continue our work with customers to help shape a more modern service which compares well not only against other landlords but also with other leading service providers with which our customers interact.

The year 2020/21 therefore has been very much one of transition as we have established plans for improvement. As we move forward, however, it is our intention to establish a culture of continuous improvement which will ensure that Almond HA is at the forefront of excellent service delivery.

Best wishes

A handwritten signature in white ink, appearing to read 'John Davidson', set against a blue background with a faint tree pattern.

John Davidson

## TAKING OUR HOMES INTO THE FUTURE...

One of our improvement projects for 2020/21 included improving the information we hold on the condition of our properties. The aim of this is to identify and prioritise programmes of work, ensuring we continue to deliver the required investment in our properties, providing customers with homes which are safe, secure, and meet modern day aspirations.

Almost 50% of Almond properties were visited in autumn 2020 to carry out a stock condition survey. This survey information is being reviewed and uploaded onto our computer systems to allow us to prepare programmes of work.

This year we invested £2.48m on component replacements and improvements. The Covid-19 pandemic impacted our ability to enhance our properties further due to our contractors being unable to carry out work because of the restrictions put in place, resulting in a significant underspend on major works. However, in the next financial year we intend to complete smoke detector upgrades to ensure all our stock meets the new standard by early 2022. Planned kitchen, bathroom, boiler, window, door and fence replacements will also take place and a small number of properties will have Photovoltaic panels fitted with battery storage to maximise the benefit of solar energy.



Pictured above at the new Piriebank Development: Cllr Paul (West Lothian Council), John Davidson (Almond HA CEO), Kathryn Brown (Almond HA tenant), Andrew Dallas (JR Construction).

As a registered social landlord, it is vital that we use every penny received to improve and protect our properties, so that our customers live in a home and within a community they are proud of. As well as component replacements and improvements, we continued to deliver essential maintenance for our customers, including emergency repairs, gas servicing, electrical safety checks and fire safety checks. A total of £1.84m was spent on this essential maintenance and although it was 13.1% less than 2019/20, we are pleased to have caught up with all repairs and maintenance reported during the various lockdown restrictions by July 2021.



#### KEY FACT

*Our financial records can be accessed on request.  
Please contact the Association for more information.*

Despite all the challenges faced around limits on personal contact and having to work from home, we also managed to get our new build site at Piriebank completed just 17 weeks later than planned. The customers who moved into the development showed extraordinary patience as the move-in date kept moving back due to the difficulties around the site and Covid-19 restrictions. We were delighted they were able to settle into their new homes before the Christmas and New Year holidays.



**KEY FACT**

**4&8**

*... 4 houses and 8 cottage flats were completed at Piriebank on 17th November 2020. Tenants were able to move into their new homes before Christmas.*

After the residents at Piriebank had settled into their new homes, we carried out a follow-up survey to ask customers for feedback on the new build and allocations process. This gave us vital information and ideas to help us improve our services for future developments, and customers could share their experiences with those planning to move under similar circumstances with the upcoming Polbeth site (pictured below).



KEY FACT

**2:5:18**

*... 2 semi-detached houses, 5 terraced houses and 18 cottage flats are being developed in Polbeth. Work started on site in August 2020 and is progressing well with completion anticipated later in 2021.*

In addition to our growth via development activities we continued to purchase properties within property blocks where we own the majority, with three properties purchased on the open market from reserves and Scottish Government funding. The completion at Piriebank, ongoing work at Polbeth and properties purchased on the open market resulted in a total spend of £2.40m on new properties this year.

As well as improving the quality and quantity of our homes, we have been working with the community to develop our outdoor spaces, including both individual gardens and shared areas.

In 2020/21 our brand-new Growing Together Project was established; a project aimed at supporting the Craigshill community to grow their own produce and create a range of 'plot-to-plate' activities. Thanks to funding secured through the Scottish Government's *Investing in Communities Fund* for Phase 1 of the project, Almond HA was able to partner with West Lothian Youth Action Project to design a new community gardening space and establish a series of growing and cooking programmes for the community.



We originally planned to have a variety of growing and cooking workshops which would allow everyone in the community to come together and learn how to grow their own fresh fruit and vegetables. When the Covid-19 pandemic hit, our project team was unable to proceed with these original plans, but they were able to respond quickly by adapting the cooking element of the project to help people who were struggling – providing meals, recipes and store cupboard ingredients to those in need including vulnerable and older people and those who were self-isolating. The flexible project design allowed us to prioritise the provision of essential food whilst the growing element slowed down temporarily.



As we moved through the year and restrictions changed, we were able to adapt the project to suit the current climate. Although we had planned to build a community garden, this had to be put on hold while Covid restrictions were still in place. In the meantime, we were able to give out growing kits to residents, which allowed them to grow their own produce at home (using their own garden, their windowsill, and even their front porch!). Growing kits included everything needed to grow a variety of vegetables, including seeds, compost, containers and step-by-step instructions that explained how to get started, right through to when to pick the vegetables.



Following the success of the growing packs, we moved forward to produce cooking packs, so that residents could learn at home how to cook a selection of meals using some of the produce they had grown themselves. Although this is not how we had originally envisaged this element of Growing Together, it allowed us to work within the restrictions and stay connected with the community, while they were able to learn how to grow their own food and cook nutritious meals from the vegetables growing in their gardens and windowsills!

Although we had to move to a remote way of delivering Growing Together during 2020-21, we are looking forward to working with customers to build a brand-new community garden within the next few months. This will become a space for all residents to access and grow their own produce.



## KEY FACTS

# 1400

*... meals were delivered to help Craigshill residents who were self-isolating or unable to leave their home due to Covid-19 restrictions.*

# 202

*... local households received 'grow your own' kits and were encouraged to try their hand at growing their own produce.*

# 2&2

*A wide range of growing kits were given out to 2 local schools and 2 pre-school groups to encourage the children to grow their own produce.*

## DEVELOPING OUR SERVICES...

When the Scottish Government announced the first lockdown in March 2020, we made arrangements for our office to close to the public and our staff to work from home. During this time, our phone lines became the most popular form of communication between customers and colleagues.

We realised that our telephone system had limitations when we were working from home as it was harder for colleagues to transfer calls, and customers were not getting the responsive service they were used to. We worked on upgrading the telephone system to allow our customers to access a seamless service whilst we continue to shape our services for the future.

Our new telephone system from Dialpad is now live and will make a positive difference to our customer service, as our colleagues can transfer calls with ease, allowing our customers to speak to the most relevant person when they call our main line.

In addition to our phone lines becoming more popular during 2020-21, we also noticed a shift in the number of people using online services. Not only did Covid-19 change the way in which we worked and delivered information as a housing association, but it also changed the way in which many services around us operated. A huge array of services supporting local people suddenly moved online and we were conscious that many of our customers didn't have access to a digital device.



This highlighted the digital divide, where those without access to a digital device or the internet, were now unable to access vital services and important updates. In response, we worked alongside partners to distribute over 400 digital devices to those most in need, and community volunteers – known as Digital Champions – gave up their time to provide digital support to those who had never used a device or the internet before.

Many recipients of the digital devices were children and having access to these devices supported their education during lockdown. Schools closed around the country and there was a move to home schooling, meaning those with no access to the internet or a digital

device at home were at a disadvantage. Some households were also sharing one device with their siblings, which became difficult when they were in different classes. The digital devices that we distributed helped to support these families and allowed children to access the information they needed to keep up with their school work.

We also supported the creation of a digital lending scheme for local groups. This meant that local people were able to borrow a digital device and return it to the community group when they no longer needed it. In addition to the digital devices, we also provided 70 households with 2 years unlimited internet data. The lockdown restrictions meant that many public wifi areas (such as libraries and community halls) were closed, so this was an opportunity for many households to access the internet, who otherwise wouldn't have been able to.

Funding was secured for this project through an array of grants including the Supporting Communities fund, Connecting Scotland and our subsidiary, Almond Enterprises.

We will continue to work with local groups and organisations to help everyone in our communities gain access to the digital world and, in turn, help to close the digital divide.



With our new telephone system and an increase in digital communication becoming more apparent, we had to consider the best way to deliver our tenancy support and welfare services during this time. Despite the expectation that there would be greater demand for the welfare benefits service, it surprisingly saw a drop in referrals.

Prior to Covid-19, these services were mainly accessed via face-to-face meetings with our partners. Taking everything into consideration, we adjusted how the services could be accessed and introduced the option of contacting our partners directly using email, telephone or video calls. This successfully increased the caseload back to expected numbers and we were able to help over 130 tenancies with the calculated gains for customers at over £350,000\*.



Drew McLellan,  
The Action Group

Difficulties continued when we had to change support providers for our tenancy sustainment service. Losing a sustainment service in the middle of a pandemic would have been a severe blow, but we were fortunate to be able to link up with Housing Options Scotland to ensure the service was continued for our customers.

Partnering with Housing Options Scotland gave us the opportunity to create a new and improved tenancy sustainment service, now known as HOS Helps. After listening to feedback about how we could help when customers were having a tough time, we made sure that this new, dedicated service would provide customers with tailored help that would suit their needs, whether it be a short-term, one-off problem or longer-term support.



Heather Alder,  
Housing Options Scotland

HOS Helps provides a variety of services, from helping customers to complete applications, to providing a listening ear for those going through a hard time. They also support our customers by providing details about the local area, including employment and volunteer opportunities, community initiatives and local groups that residents can get involved in.

\*standard projections used by welfare and benefit advice services

## KEY FACT

# 3.05

*£3.05m was spent on continuing and improving our services in 2020/21.*

# TRANSITIONING INTO A MODERN EMPLOYER...

The many changes that have happened over the past year have helped us as an employer to look at how we operate and understand what helps our colleagues to provide their best, high-quality work.

A lot changed in March 2020 when our colleagues were required to adhere to the Work From Home guidance from Westminster and Holyrood, and then later the more restrictive Stay At Home order. There were difficulties and challenges to overcome, but there were also benefits and many lessons that we have learnt along the way.

The initial thought of working from home for many of our colleagues was daunting. We needed to set up each member of staff with the relevant ICT equipment and ensure everyone had an adequate home working space. On top of that, the closure of schools across the country meant that some of our staff were juggling home schooling and home working at the same time, while others were living alone and had limited interaction with others.

As an Association, we wanted to do everything in our power to help each member of staff and, in turn, ensure this would help our customers who were relying on our services during this difficult time. We used a tailored approach for each of our colleagues, to allow for home schooling and social interaction whilst ensuring the quality of our services was maintained.

As time went on, we noticed that many of our staff were enjoying working from home. As an Association we recognised that when our colleagues had a positive work-life balance and flexible working arrangements, the quality of work or productivity was not adversely affected. Each of our colleagues is passionate about their work and adding a flexible working life to the agenda enhanced their enthusiasm and renewed their commitment to their work and to our customers.

Throughout the year our colleagues took part in the 'Brilliant Scotland' project run by the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations in conjunction with the Dolphin Index. This project has helped us understand what is important to our colleagues and we are working together to develop a new, positive working culture based around the identification of our vision and values. The project is also helping us to understand our strengths and weaknesses and we are planning to use the information gathered to develop a formal statement reflecting our purpose and values within the coming months.

Taking all of this into account, we are now shifting towards a more modern and flexible approach to the workplace. We have already noticed a positive change within the Association and we are optimistic that this will lead to a better service for our customers. Our next steps will be contingent on the feedback we receive from our customers and our colleagues to help us shape our future direction.





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