

A close-up photograph of a man with short brown hair smiling warmly at a young girl with blonde hair and blue eyes. The girl is wearing a purple and white checkered dress with ruffled shoulders. The man's hands are visible, gently holding the girl. The background is softly blurred, suggesting an indoor setting.

Grand Union Housing Group

Customer annual report 2021/22

Introduction from Group Chief Executive Aileen Evans

As a provider of affordable homes and additional support services, our role has never been as important as it is now.

World events and a shortage of properly affordable housing are forcing people into real poverty, where they are having to make the terrible choice between heating their homes or feeding their families, and we know that some can do neither. What we do now, and in the coming years, is key to helping our customers.

We also need to ensure that we minimise our impact on the environment and are working to decarbonise our homes and minimise our carbon footprint. We're doing this because we want to minimise our impact on the planet and, equally as importantly, provide fuel-efficient and cheap-to-run homes for our customers, so that we help end fuel poverty.

Despite the challenges faced with labour and materials shortages, we built over 300 homes last year – a record number for Grand Union.

We recognise the need for more affordable homes, which is why, amongst others, we built 57 social rent homes last year – the same number as we've delivered in the previous nine years combined. We have almost 900 affordable homes we are going to build, as

well as a new extra care scheme, Chamomile Gardens in Biggleswade, which is our largest single development ever and will provide 93 high quality homes for older people.

Using the data gathered from a large customer survey we did last year, we will be able to ensure our services are fit for purpose, both now and in the future. We are determined to have the best customer service in the sector, which is why it's so important that we listen to your views and opinions. That's why we have launched Voice - our new feedback channel that gives you the opportunity to share your opinions on a range of topics including new concepts, ideas to improve service and experience, and scrutinise our performance.

We look forward to taking on the challenges ahead over the next 12 months and ensuring the customer voice is at the heart of our decisions.

Aileen Evans

Aileen Evans
Group Chief Executive



Introduction from Customer Experience Committee member Ashleigh Webber

I've been a member of Grand Union's Customer Experience Committee for more than two years and it's been really rewarding for me.

I live in a Grand Union home, so it's good to be involved in something that has a direct impact on my life, and the lives of those like me.

This year has been a busy one and my favourite part has been visiting developments – something we weren't able to do during the pandemic! This includes seeing the new extension at an extra care scheme, Quince Court, which puts socialising and wellbeing at the heart of the building, and Chamomile Gardens – another fantastic extra care scheme, Grand Union's biggest development to date!

I meet with staff members at Grand Union every three months where I learn of updates and key projects going forward. It's a really exciting time to be on the committee, particularly because of the work Grand Union is doing around customer experience.

I'm one of two customers on the steering group for Voice – a brand new platform that will revolutionise the way customers and colleagues can leave anonymous feedback, take part in surveys and answer questions to help shape Grand Union's services.

As part of this steering group, I recently met data experts and individuals from the Government's Department of Levelling Up,

Housing and Communities involved in this customer experience transformation. The use of data analytics – something I knew very little about before but involves understanding the different needs of customers and how to tailor support to individuals – will be game-changing.

I'm also looking forward to taking part in dementia awareness training, helping to understand the needs of customers impacted by the condition, making sure they are considered in business changes and new development plans.

The next year will be challenging for many people, myself included, with the cost-of-living crisis and economic climate. That's why I'm keen to continue to express my views on the committee and learn more about the mental health support and financial advice Grand Union can offer its customers.



Ashleigh Webber
Customer Experience Committee member

What we do

Homes for rent

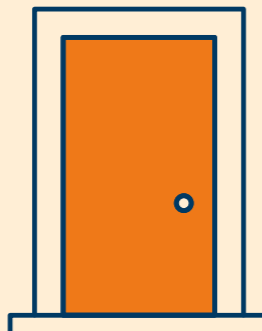
We provide a number of different rental options including:

- **Social rent** – a government-subsidised rent for those on low incomes
- **Independent Living** – for people over 55
- **Supported Living for adults with learning disabilities** – providing tailored care
- **Extra care** – housing with 24/7 support services on hand
- **Mutual exchange** – if you are already renting a property and wish to move, you could be eligible to swap with another customer
- **Market rent** – residential properties to let at standard market rates
- **Domestic abuse refuges** – emergency housing for those experiencing domestic abuse

Homes for sale

We also provide a number of different home-ownership options.

- Grand Union Living offers truly affordable ways into home ownership, including shared ownership.
- Grand Union Homes provides homes for outright purchase.



Who we are

We've been in business for over 25 years and provide over 12,500 homes for more than 27,000 people across Bedfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Northamptonshire and Hertfordshire. We're an £86 million turnover social business with almost 400 staff.

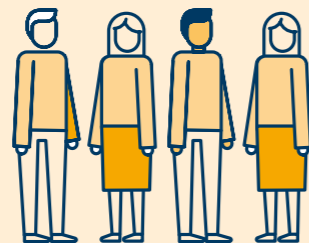
Our mission is **more homes, stronger communities, better lives**. We build affordable homes, provide personal support, and help people to learn, work and be healthy.

We're a financially stable and innovative not-for-profit organisation that believes in partnership and collaboration. We plan to build 1,959 more new homes in the coming years to play our part in ending the housing crisis.

We believe we're at our best when we're working together – with a culture of collaboration, support and shared ideas. We want our colleagues to feel they can rely on the people around them and seek help when they need it.

We want to ensure that work can be shaped around your individual circumstances and have introduced flexible working initiatives to ensure that's the case. These are constantly being reviewed to ensure they best match the needs of our people.

We work at pace and have drive and ambition. We have no doubt we're made better for having a diverse workforce – bringing a wide range of ideas, experiences and knowledge to the table. We understand that this will all be wasted if we don't have a culture of inclusion where everyone feels like they belong.





Our support services

We believe in providing support to our customers to enable them to have successful tenancies, which is why we offer a number of support services including:

- Money, debt and benefit advice
- Life24 – our unique telecare and personalised support service
- Occupational therapist
- Wellbeing support
- Employment and training support
- Youth work

Between April 2021 and March 2022, our Life24 service made 54,669 wellbeing checks.

This was vitally important as we went through lockdowns and customers were feeling socially isolated.

We also responded to 233 out-of-hours calls where a customer had no-one else to respond or had fallen but not injured themselves and needed our help.

Success story: The Ball family - A purpose- built home for full-time carers

Kaysey and Andrew, from Biggleswade, are full-time carers to their profoundly disabled daughters, Liyla, ten, and five-year-old Delcie. Their rented Grand Union home, where they also live with son Freddie, 11, and two dogs, was no longer fit for purpose, despite providing them happy memories for the past nine years.

Liyla and Delcie are reliant on hoists, electric beds, a specialist extension and other adaptations to help them. But, with the girls getting older, their needs have outgrown their home. They require new hoists, a wet room, and importantly, a property where they aren't reliant on stairs.

We worked in partnership with Central Bedfordshire Council to build the Balls a bespoke property – both affordable and fit for purpose. Their new home enables the family to live safely, happily and with independence, with both girls' bedrooms being downstairs, next to a Jack and Jill wet room, improved hoists and other much-needed adaptations.

Mum Kaysey said: "We loved our old home, but sadly, due to our circumstances, it just wasn't able to fulfil our needs. Liyla and Delcie require one-to-one care; they struggle with daily tasks, from going down the stairs to getting in and out of bed.

"Our eldest, Freddie, was born in 2010, without complications. Just a year later, we welcomed Liyla into our family, who was born with an extremely rare condition which doesn't even have a name; she is the only person in the world to live with it. It affects her development – she only started walking aged seven, and that was a big, happy surprise.

"Delcie came along a bit further down the line. I had a fine pregnancy, so there was no

inkling that anything was untoward with her health. But, just two days before she was born, we received the lifechanging news that she had a chromosome disorder known as 'inverted duplication and deletion of 8p'.

"We're fortunate that Delcie isn't paralysed, is happy and can understand what's going on. But, due to her low muscle tone, she can't hold her weight, so often relies on a wheelchair.

"Due to their conditions, we require adaptations in our home to get by. We have ceiling hoists, downstairs bedrooms, electric beds which move up and down, alongside a specialist extension. But with the girls getting older, and heavier to carry, the house was simply no longer suitable."

Both Kaysey and husband Andrew are unable to work, instead providing full-time care for their children. While Kaysey would like nothing more than a job, she struggles to find an employer that understands her situation and enables her to take long periods of leave to stay with Delcie in hospital.

Instead, Kaysey volunteers for Home Start, a charity which supports new parents and their children facing tough times, and at Luton Crown and Magistrates Courts, supporting victims during trials. "It's a way of giving something back", she says.

Desperate for help regarding their home, the family contacted Central Bedfordshire Council who liaised with Grand Union.

"When Grand Union informed us that we would have a brand-new chalet bungalow built for us, bespoke to our needs, it was beyond our wildest dreams."



Now settled in their new home, Kaysey added: "It's been fantastic to be involved in the project from the very start. We've had access to building plans and had a direct input in the design of the home.

"We're fortunate the bungalow is a new build, as it finally gives us the space we require.

"We're so grateful for the help of Grand Union and Central Bedfordshire Council, who listened to us and helped provide us with a fully-adapted home we simply couldn't have afforded on our own."

"When Grand Union informed us that we would have a brand-new chalet bungalow built for us, bespoke to our needs, it was beyond our wildest dreams."

Our performance

Customer satisfaction

At Grand Union, we want to provide the best service we can to customers. We track how we're doing in several different ways, but two of the key ones are via customer satisfaction and sentiment scores.

CSAT is short for 'customer satisfaction' and helps us to track how satisfied customers are with our performance. The scores are between 1 and 5, with 5 being the highest.

Sentiment is how customers feel about the service we provide. It's calculated by looking at the actual words in your feedback. A score is given between 1 and 5, with 1 being negative and 5 being positive.

These scores are very important to us as they allow us to understand how we are doing and where we can improve.

Here are the average satisfaction and sentiment scores for key business areas for 2021/22.

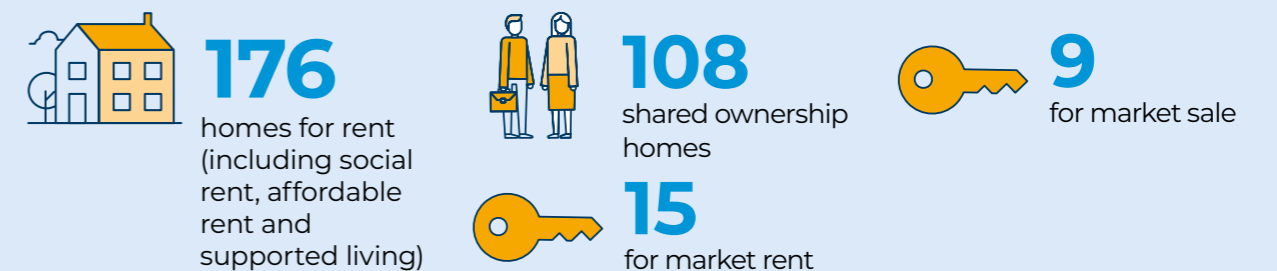


Business performance



Building new homes

In 2021/22 we built **308** new homes



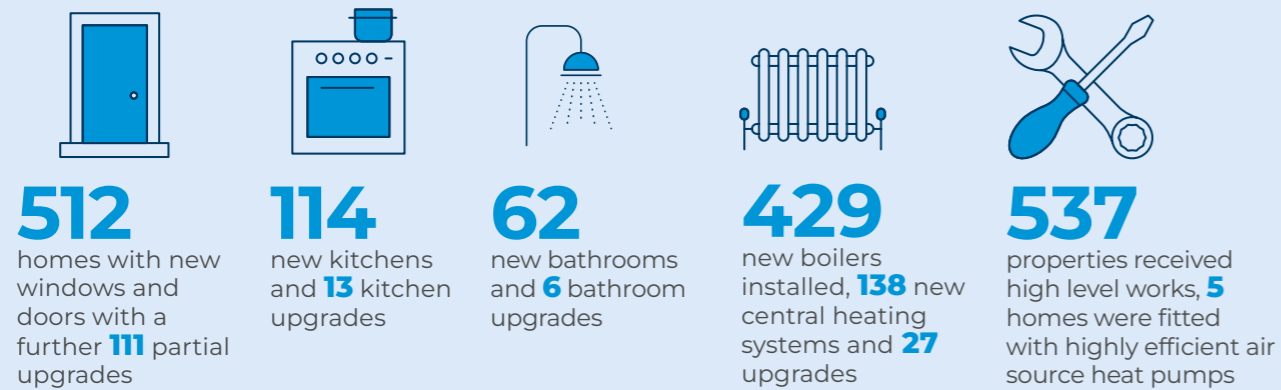
Where we've built

In 2021/22, we built homes across our operating region – including Milton Keynes, Bedford, Northampton and rural villages such as Gravenhurst.

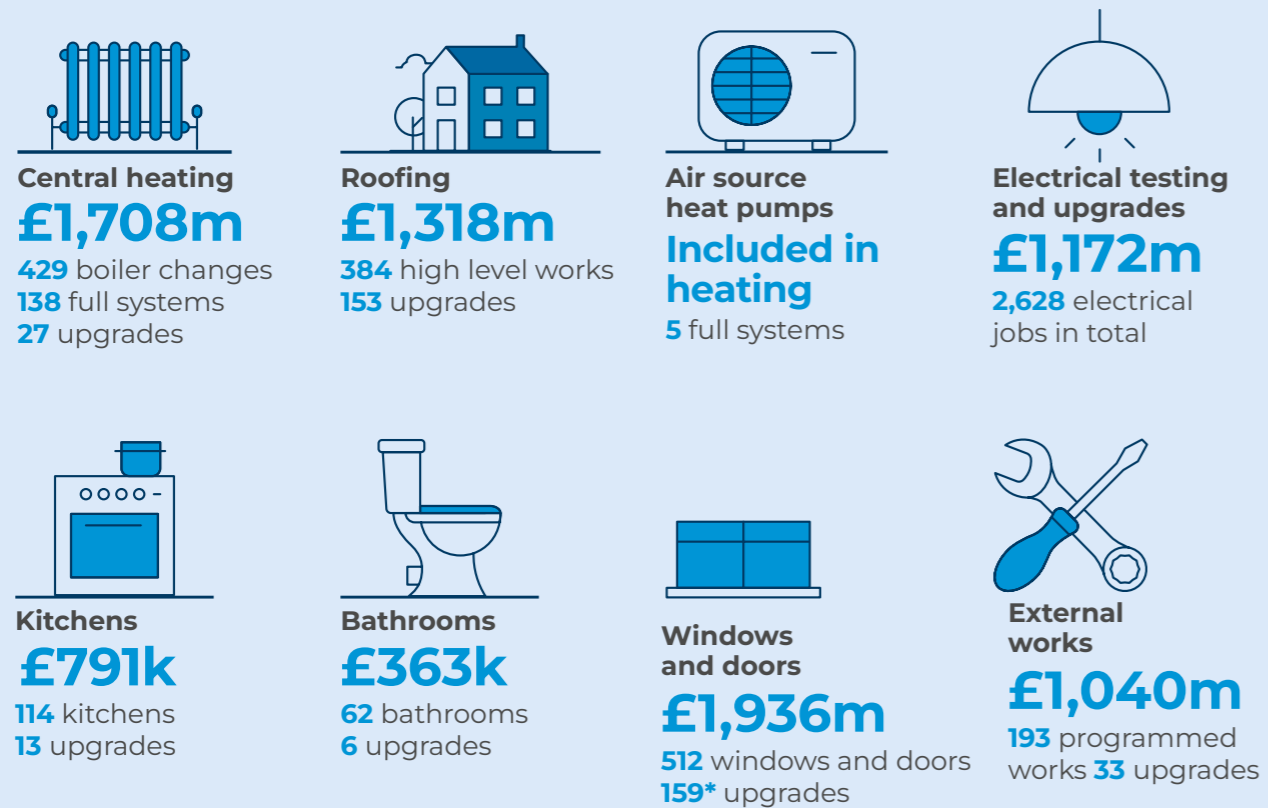
Maintaining homes

The condition of our homes is continually reviewed, with the results determining a long-term repair and replacement programme.

38,574 repairs were carried out and **596** empty homes were prepared for new customers to move in to. We spent **£21.101m** on home improvements and repairs which included:



Key highlights of 2021/22 spend and works:

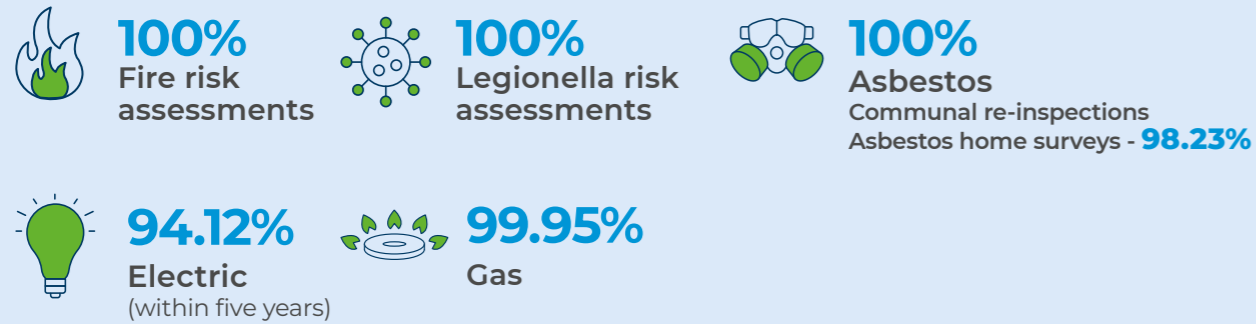


*This includes 48 garage doors



Keeping you safe

Our compliance levels at the end of the year:



Providing safe spaces

We're committed to do all we can to tackle domestic abuse and support those in need so they can rebuild their lives.

In September 2021 we opened our newest, and fifth, domestic abuse refuge which can accommodate up to ten women, either with or without children.

Designed to be a secure home and built to a high-standard as part of our role as the specialist accommodation landlord, the Bedford refuge includes self-contained flats that provide a safe and stable place for women and their children to live, whilst accessing therapeutic recovery support.

These refuges provide survivors with a safe place and work towards living a life free from trauma.

While these refuges have been designed specifically for women, it's important to recognise that domestic abuse affects all genders.

We have several other resources available to customers experiencing domestic abuse in order to make their home safe. One of which is our Life24 personal alarm pendant. Since January 2021 we have installed 77 alarms which have been specially adapted.

In December 2021, we also started to provide video doorbells to our customers, with 20 installed so far.

Since January 2021, our Domestic Abuse & Safeguarding team have supported 165 customers with domestic abuse varying in support from being safer in their home, to moving across the country or into a refuge.

Domestic abuse:

- 127** referrals made for customers
- 5** colleagues offered support
- 2** customers successfully moved into refuge
- 1** new refuge opened



“With ASHPs, customers are more in control of their energy use, so less energy is wasted and bills aren't so high.”

Anthony Moye Special Project Surveyor

Our environmental work

We know that we have a responsibility to make a positive impact on the environment, as well as to our customers, colleagues, and partners.

In late 2021, we launched our Environmental Sustainability Strategy, which changes the way we manage and invest in our homes and estates for good.

We're committed to becoming a zero-carbon organisation, but our ambitions don't stop there.

We're also planning to enhance biodiversity and reduce our water usage and waste production.

We're aiming for positive environmental impacts in terms of both the properties and the estates, including improvements in the amount and management of green space.

What have we done?

- In 2021/22, we undertook 1,931 energy performance certificate (EPC) ratings, which has helped to plan and our energy improvement on our homes, which we aim to be all EPC band C or above
- We have begun looking into having all-electric repairs vehicles and charging points to support this change
- We have committed to colleague training about sustainability
- We have installed solar panels on properties, and Air Source Heat Pumps (ASHPs), which are more energy efficient as they draw heat from the outside environment.





Swift boxes

With swifts joining the list of Britain's most endangered birds, we're doing our bit to help by installing swift holes and boxes in several of our buildings, including our new homes at Bradwell Common in Milton Keynes. We've done this for several years and will continue to do so as part of our planned work around biodiversity.

Supporting the community

Our Community Investment team is dedicated to improving communities and the lives of those who live in the area. From youth activities, employment support, gardening projects and health awareness events, there are many ways in which the team improves the lives of our customers. We've included a snapshot of our work.

Award winning community transformation

We won an award for our work in transforming a community blighted by crime in Clifton, Bedfordshire. We were recognised at the Community Awards by Aico|HomeLINK in the category of Neighbourhood Transformation.



Gardening for wellbeing

There is plenty of evidence to show that gardening and contact with nature is good for you, plus it has the bonus of being great for the environment too. We worked with NHS social prescribers, who are connected to GP surgeries and their patients, to take a broader approach to health and wellbeing. The pilot was a great success; we ran 28 gardening sessions. In total we delivered 202 hours of therapeutic horticulture!

Artwork for all

While working on our biggest ever development, Chamomile Gardens, members of the public were invited to choose their favourite artwork design from local artists. The winner was Kelly Douglas, a blacksmith from Northamptonshire. Her sculpture includes three huge bronze flower statues.

Employment support

Our Community Investment team helps customers find employment, while also providing help with CVs and interview tips. Employment, Training & Skills Co-ordinator, Scott recently helped a family of Syrian refugees find employment, training opportunities and a fresh start in the UK. He said: "I got to know the family very well and they are just one example of the many individuals I work with, who are a credit to themselves, and have a tenacious drive. Their progress and the way they have overcome adversity is wonderful."



Focus on: Natalie Blake

Despite being relatively new to Grand Union, Health & Housing Co-ordinator Natalie has already helped to revolutionise our approach to customer wellbeing. With a background in the sector, she's well-equipped to help put health on the forefront of housing professionals' minds. She regularly meets with customers in the heart of our communities, providing them with simple tips to help improve their health.

Getting health and housing on the agenda

Natalie's been with Grand Union since January 2022 and her work has already sent ripples through both the organisation and the communities we are proud to serve.

"The role of a Health & Housing Co-ordinator is a recently introduced position at Grand Union, so much of my work so far has been about establishing my role within the organisation. This has been a great opportunity for me, as I've been really able to mould the role and make it my own.

"As a Health & Housing Co-ordinator, I help to develop the link between public health and housing. It's been interesting to see how things are currently running at Grand Union and the processes we have in place, highlighting any areas where we can bring more of a health focus."

The benefits of a cuppa

One of the first projects Natalie implemented at Grand Union was a Tea and Talk initiative at Bilberry Road, Clifton. The events, held every two weeks, bring health information into the heart of this Bedfordshire community.

"The first few Tea and Talk events have been a real success and it's been rewarding to get out into the community and meet local people.

"We've had some great partnership working at the events, with different local services, including More Life, Kooth and Stop Smoking, providing tips on different aspects of health, such as stopping smoking, healthy eating and mental wellbeing. We also offer BMI measurements, blood tests and health 'MOTs'. Everyone is welcome to come down

and talk about any health concerns they may have, in exchange for a cuppa.

"We run the project in a converted flat, with bedrooms used as meeting rooms, and when the weather is nice we're in the front garden; it's a great way to bring the meetings to the heart of the community and to be visible among residents.

"There's been a great response from locals so far, expressing how much they appreciate us reaching out to the community."

Making a difference to people's lives

On a daily basis, Natalie has a clear impact on the wellbeing of our customers – she doesn't take this responsibility for granted.

"The most rewarding part of what I do is that I'm often involved in improving someone's health in the long run, even if it's just having a quick word in someone's ear, which is their catalyst to make healthier choices. I'm making a difference to people's lives and that's something I am very proud of."

Supporting you

Our customers turn to us when they need support, and we make sure they get the advice or practical support they need.



£2.44m

benefits secured for customers in 2021/22

£0.81m of assistance with rent such as Housing Benefit, Discretionary Housing payments or the housing costs element of Universal Credit

£0.7m in disability payments which provide extra money for customers with long-term health problems or disabilities

We provide a range of services to support our customers through the ongoing complexities of welfare reform changes which have impacted them.

	2021/22
Welfare Benefits – opened cases	1,267
Money Advice – opened cases	182
Benefits gains for customers	£2.4m

We've also signed up to Harry's Pledge – an initiative to improve the lives of UK carers – and have supported the campaign at Westminster.





Success stories: Kara's story

Kara and her son moved to their Grand Union home from a women's refuge three years ago. Having been through some tough times, they were excited to finally have a place of their own.

"At first I was happy, but then I went downhill. I was on Employment Support Allowance, then it was taken away from me. The bills were racking up, I was behind with my rent, and my Universal Credit wasn't getting sorted either. I was too scared to look at my bank account and I didn't even open the curtains because if I saw the postman coming, I knew the mail would just be bills and bad news."

Kara was referred to our Wellbeing & Support team due to the extent of her rent arrears and Katy, one of our Wellbeing & Support Co-ordinators who support customers to sustain their tenancies, got in touch with Kara.

"Katy had so much faith in me and helped me to organise my standing orders for my rent and my bills so I could stop worrying about them. These might sound like small things to some people, but this was a big step for me. I'm proud how far I've come, from thinking that I couldn't do it. All I needed was that bit of help and it's shown me that every step is a step towards good times."

Read more about Kara's story on our website: www.guhg.co.uk/success/kara/

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Giving you a voice

At the end of last year, we asked all customers to participate in a survey and over 2,500 of you participated. One of the things you told us was we need to listen to you more and take your views into account when making decisions.

We want this to change – especially given that one of the key commitments of the Government's Social Housing White Paper is to ensure customers have their voice heard by their landlord. However, it's worth stating that we are doing this not because we have to, but because **we want to listen and improve.**

That's why we've just launched **Grand Union Voice**, our new online community.

By joining Voice, customers can help shape and improve our services. It's totally anonymous too, so whether you're completing polls, surveys, taking part in discussions or even doing some fun stuff, you can be totally honest about how you feel about Grand Union.

Sign up now at voice.guhg.uk

Your feedback and getting in touch with us

We received **11,787** customer responses through Rant & Rave, our customer feedback tool



77,645

phone calls answered by our Customer Contact team

2,398 web chats were answered by our Customer Contact team

5,462 interactions were dealt with by Sam, our virtual web assistant

34,768 emails were dealt with by our Customer Contact team

1,561 additional customers signed up to our MyGUHG portal



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