

Annual Report 2021



Connexus

Hello and welcome to the Connexus Annual Report 2021



Richard Woolley, CEO

The Coronavirus pandemic has dominated all of our lives this year, and I'm incredibly grateful to my colleagues at Connexus for adapting and maintaining services as much as possible during this time. Despite our best efforts, our restricted ways of working following Government guidelines has unfortunately resulted in a backlog of repair requests. Still, thankfully, now that restrictions have largely been lifted, our Repairs and Maintenance team are making significant inroads into resolving this.

In last year's annual report, I was optimistic that the Regulator would look at our governance grading this year. However, they have postponed this review, not due to any specific concerns, but due to the work we were doing to bring all housing associations under the Connexus umbrella, into one organisation; Connexus Homes. It's likely, the Regulator will now carry out an "In-Depth Assessment" for Connexus later in this calendar year.

The consolidation of the housing associations in the group into one company was an early aim of the 2020-23 Corporate Plan approved by our Board in March 2020. This work was important as it gave us the opportunity to make savings in back-office costs and to ensure our focus of Connexus is clearly on what matters to the customer.

During the year, the Government issued the Social Housing White Paper and we were really pleased to see that the key focuses linked clearly with our focus on the customer, with the overarching themes being building and resident safety, as well as resident voice. Safety will always be the number one priority for us. We carry out an extensive number of checks on our homes to ensure that our customers are as safe as possible.

We're also a strong advocate of the voice of the customer and were really proud to be early adopters of the National Housing Federation's "Together with tenants" initiative. I'd like to thank all of our customers who have taken the time to review our services, through completing surveys, or responding to consultations through our new interactive software on our website. Being a rural housing association with a vast geography, I appreciate that it may seem

difficult to give meaningful feedback but I can assure you that we're committed to listening and acting on what you tell us.

One of our key priorities is to improve the homes for our existing residents. A significant amount of work has been carried out in the year through stock condition surveys to allow us to programme in work needed over the coming years to manage this. In addition, we have a development programme of around 250 new homes each year (this was reduced in 2020-21 due to the pandemic).

Our work with residents and in the community hugely important to us. Two highlights in the year were the opening of the Young Persons Service in Hereford and the continued success in difficult times for the Shropshire Domestic Abuse Service, which forms part of Connexus.

Over the next year, we'll be delivering the remaining objectives set in our 2020-23 Corporate plan and establishing with the Board the long-term focus.. Clearly, as part of this, customer and stakeholders' views are fundamental, and I look forward to hearing from you during that time.

Thank you for your support during an incredibly difficult year.

Stay safe.



How have we performed this year?



Number of
Connexus homes
10,085



New homes built
189
(compared to
199 last year)



Gas Safety
Compliance
99.99%



Current total
tenants
12,860



Repairs
satisfaction
89%



Shared ownership
29 homes sold
(compared to 30 last year)



Customer
satisfaction
81.53%



How many homes
we've invested in
453



Our focus at Connexus is our customers and putting them at the heart of everything we do. We strive for excellence and admit that things don't always go as planned.

We are committed to improving our services across Herefordshire and Shropshire and making these rural communities better places to live and work.

Richard Woolley, CEO

How we are committed to our communities

Our Community Development Fund has been set up to help fund communities working together, on local projects, which have a positive effect in their area of Herefordshire and Shropshire.

Over the last year, we donated over £60,000 worth of grants to local community projects.

The projects supported by the Community Development Fund (CDF) in more normal times tend to be community groups doing anything from rejuvenating outdoor spaces to running skills development programmes. Early in the lockdown, we used CDF grants to help support the food banks that have become even more vital to many during the Coronavirus pandemic. We donated a total of £2,700 to 18 local food banks across Shropshire and Herefordshire. This follows a previous grant of £2,700 to Ludlow Food Bank to improve their storage facilities.



Community Development Fund total

£60k

(compared to £40k last year)



Community activities total

£6k

(compared to £12k last year)



CDF groups/projects supported

30

(compared to 24 last year)



Alison Bengel, Head of School at Mount Pleasant Primary in Shrewsbury with some of the computers donated by Connexus

Connexus has donated over 60 desktop and laptop computers to schools across Shropshire and Herefordshire. The computers were no longer suitable for the work performed by Connexus staff but will now be used to assist children in the classroom with digital learning.

- **Belmont Wanderers Girls Under 16's football team** came to us looking for sponsorship for tracksuits for the team to go to matches in and use for training. From the funding we provided the team were able to purchase 15 full tracksuits for their under 16 team. Although this will benefit the team now initially, they are planning for the tracksuits to be handed down to other players as well in the future.
- **Shawbury Football Club** With fewer leisure activities available to all of us under Coronavirus restrictions, and with many of us feeling a rejuvenated focus on health, we're proud to support local sports teams for kids and adults. Shawbury FC started their junior football training sessions (while following COVID-19 guidelines) and successfully applied for a CDF grant of £2544.90 for new kit to see them through the upcoming season. Besides the obvious benefits to youngsters' health, these junior football sessions will be a stress reliever for parents.



The efforts made by everybody working so hard at our local food banks and charities have been inspirational. They represent the best of our communities and I'm proud that Connexus, even in a small way, will be able to help individuals and families needing support.

Christine Duggan, Director of Operations at Connexus

Our Community Development Fund gives grants up to £5,000. Apply here: connexus-group.co.uk/cdf

How are we investing in your homes



Every year, Connexus invests, where needed, its profits back into our customers' homes. Over the next year, our work program focuses on improving our existing houses by completing internal improvements, including replacing kitchens, bathrooms, boilers, full heating, and any rewiring needed.

We will also be looking at external works, replacing roofs, windows, exterior wall insulation, and updating internal communal areas.

Our goal is to work alongside our customer lead focus groups that we have in place, to help us improve our policies and procedures to give you a better service and to invest our money where it is needed, and get customer feedback around this.

Not only are we improving individual homes, but part of our investment programme will also be looking at entire regeneration projects in areas within Herefordshire and Shropshire.

In 2020 we implemented a new open consult platform, CiviQ, which has revolutionised the way we consult with

our customers to find out how they feel our services are performing and gain ideas on how we can improve.

Whereas previously our customers had to involve themselves via post or in-person, CiviQ Open Consult is an online portal that any customers can sign up to quickly and easily. This accessible online access is giving us access to a broader range of our tenants' views than ever before, allowing us to tailor our services to the needs of local communities.

Using CiviQ has allowed our tenants to participate in our repairs consultation, with the volume of feedback being at an all-time high, with a wider range of age groups responding than we had with the panels.

Over the past year, there have been difficulties delivering a full repairs service, and many of our customers experienced delays. We thank all our customers for helping us to follow Government COVID-19 safety guidelines, and our team (alongside approved local contractors) has been working extra hours to tackle a backlog of appointments that built up due to lockdown restrictions.



The volume of feedback we received for our recent consultation on our repairs service was 117% higher than previous consultations. We can now use this feedback to shape our repairs service and to write our new repairs policy and procedure, all directly guided by our customers.

Jacqui Gears - Connexus Communities Manager



How many homes we've invested in

453



Repairs completed

25,617



Repairs completed in a single visit

91%



New Kitchens **122**
New Bathrooms **71**



Repairs completed within target

76.03%



Customer satisfaction with repairs

88.53%

How did we help?



New comments (compared to 476 last year)

475



New complaints (compared to 67 last year)

48



New compliments (compared to 221 last year)

132



Calls received (compared to 129,772 last year)

87,822



Within the past 12 months, our teams have successfully resolved 193 cases of ASB within Herefordshire and Shropshire."

Enforcement Team, Connexus



Average time to answer calls

3 minutes 35 seconds



Calls resolved at first point of contact

87%



Customer satisfaction with calls

90.12%

Over the past year, we have implemented a new complaints policy and procedure, effective from Jan 2021, and introduced a new appointment booking method to reduce the number of cancelled/missed appointments. We encourage all feedback from customers and have developed the complaints policy and the complaints procedure to ensure that we deal with complaints effectively and fairly.

We live in unprecedented times; never in our lifetimes have families been asked to stay at home for extended periods. Living, working, playing, home-schooling in one space 24/7. Being allowed out to exercise, shop for essentials, or seek medical attention. Naturally, as we all followed Government guidelines to stay at home, save lives and protect the NHS, noise nuisance complaints, in particular, increased across the UK. Neighbours were experiencing levels of noise they had never experienced before and were getting distressed. Normal living noise became unbearable as we were all confined to our homes, living in such a different way than ever before.

As noise complaints increased, our teams had to think differently and ultimately distinguish between noise nuisance ASB and normal living noise. We take every report of ASB we receive seriously and actively work with our customers and communities to resolve any identified ASB. Our housing teams are trained in mediation. We coach, educate, support our customers, communities, and individuals as we understand this can be a distressing

time. We also work with neighbours to settle any unrest and come to agreements where necessary. We have access to specialist apps that allow us to assess noise nuisance complaints.



How are we supporting you in your home?

At Connexus, we're focused on our customers, we take great pride in, and are passionate about delivering excellent service.

Our values underpin our approach in delivering our core principles; Working on what matters to the customer, understanding that one size doesn't fit all, understanding what our customers want from our services, and using this knowledge to shape our service delivery and by working as one team and seeing our organisation as one system from the beginning to the end.

Connexus is committed to supporting customers with different needs. Over the last year, we have expanded our support services in Hereford, offering young people aged 16-25 tailored support to help them gain essential life skills to enable them to live independently.

The scheme has been jointly funded by Connexus, Herefordshire Council, and Homes England. It aims to provide young people with the opportunity to learn the skills they need to thrive in their local community and maintain a healthy lifestyle. The service also works with families across the county to provide mediation support to prevent youth homelessness.

Connexus worked in partnership with Herefordshire Council and the developers, Harpers, to follow COVID-19 guidelines and complete the scheme on time and within budget and has seen the creation of 13 local jobs.

Despite the last year's challenges, our lettings team has been focused on making it easier for our customers to live in one of our homes. We keep them informed throughout the moving process and provide help and advice on applying for any related welfare benefits.



Number of tenants

12,860



Number of new tenants

837

(compared to 714 last year)



Number of Lets

737

(supported 320)



Re-Let Times

60.64

days

Championing Quality Social Housing

Our focus at Connexus is on improving lives by building homes in places where people want to live and homes that they can afford to heat and live in.

We are committed to working in rural communities - building homes to ensure that those communities continue to thrive, keeping schools and facilities open by providing homes for young families with a local connection, and providing homes for those whose circumstances may have changed due to age, disability, or other life events.

During the last year, we have completed developments in Herefordshire and Shropshire to provide much-needed quality housing, including building new homes that satisfy our commitment to reduce carbon emissions and invest in energy efficiency.

This year alone we will be investing a total of £13 million in our improvement plan.

As part of these improvement works, we will be spending £2.5million on energy efficiency work in a bid to reduce fuel poverty within our rural communities.

Connexus has already invested in the new build PassivHaus scheme and has found that customers have seen significant savings in energy bills compared to typical new build houses. We want all our customers to have the same experience of living in comfortable, energy-efficient homes and The Warmer Homes project consists of 32 of our houses (plus some additional flats) in Herefordshire and 80 homes in Shropshire will be fitted with high-quality external wall insulation, limiting heat loss and helping the home to be more comfortable to live. Effectively insulating a home while ensuring proper ventilation also limits the effects of condensation and damp, which can be an all-too-common concern in rural homes.

The 80 homes in Shropshire that are part of the Warmer Homes project will also have their heating systems replaced, in line with the Connexus commitment to removing solid fuel heating systems and continuing the Government's approach to reducing carbon emissions through electric heating systems and heat pumps.

The Passivhaus development in Much Wenlock, Shropshire has risen to prominence both in and out of our sector and was included as one of Britain's Greenest Streets by The Sunday Times.

Twenty-four new affordable homes were handed over to new residents at the Oak Meadow development in Bishops Castle, delivering high-quality, affordable

housing to the rural community in Shropshire.

The £9 million redevelopments of Beattie Avenue in Hereford consist of two phases, and we are pleased that phase one has now been completed. In 2020 the 41 prefabricated bungalows that existed for over 60 years have now been replaced, and a further 30 new homes will be built consisting of social housing and shared ownership properties, allowing first-time buyers to get onto the property market in the area. We will provide much-needed homes at our new development at Eign Mill Road in Bartomsham, Herefordshire. Eleven new properties have been built, consisting of 9 shared ownership and two accessible homes.

The completion of phase one of our affordable housing development at Bath Street in Hereford of 27 high-quality apartments (including 15 for affordable rent) has been completed, with 47 more affordable rented properties due for completion as part of phase two in 2021.



New homes built

189 (Next year goal: 250)



Shared Ownership

29 homes sold



Rural homes (of the 189 built)

89%



Keeping our customers safe & secure

During the last year, Connexus has been actively making changes, embedding a compliance culture where we invest in our colleagues and systems to ensure everyone is safe, at work and home. It's become a core way of thinking. Our Board members and Executive Management team have been vital in making sure that we all have the right resources, training, and systems in place to do our jobs well.

In consultation with our customers, we are rolling out an annual programme of visiting our customers in their homes to check the electrical heating and fire detection within them as well as a new carbon monoxide detector installation programme into all properties with a fixed gas appliance (for example, a gas boiler or a gas fire).

We already complete annual gas safety checks within customers' homes. Adding a carbon monoxide detector ensures an extra layer of safety to ensure our customers feel safe in their homes.

At Connexus, health and safety training is a vital part, ensuring that colleagues understand its importance and role in sustaining a culture with Health and Safety at its heart. Health, safety, and compliance haven't been far from our minds, even during a global pandemic. We have continued to train our teams, with an astonishing 1448 training sessions being held - most of these being in an online environment. We launched a PRIDE in health and safety pledge, which each colleague has signed, to make change happen.



Gas safety compliance

99.99%



Oil safety compliance

97.57%



Solid fuel safety compliance

94.85%



Electrical safety compliance

71.87%



Colleague Training Sessions

1448



Connexus is committed to keeping customers safe in their homes and will actively listen and engage with customers to ensure that they are and feel safe in their homes."

Fleur Whittingham, Head of Health and Safety and Compliance, Connexus

You said we did

Back in the autumn of 2019, we became an early adopter of The Together with Tenants charter. This national initiative focuses on strengthening the relationships between housing associations and their customers.

We launched our Together with Tenants campaign back in February 2020 across social media, email, and our website inviting our customers to be involved and received over 50 sign-ups.

We chatted with these customers to find out what interests them and how they wanted to design ways that work for the customer. So, customers are looking at how well we keep you informed for the first review of our services.

Here's what you told us:

- Reduce the phone line options
- Keep us better updated on our emergency repairs
- Get us online

So, here's what we are doing in response to your feedback:

- The phone line options have been reduced, and we have put in place two skilled teams, one for repairs and one for housing, to deal with your enquiries quicker and more effectively.
- Once you have logged an emergency repair with us, you will be assigned a dedicated work planner who will contact you to keep you up to date on progress.

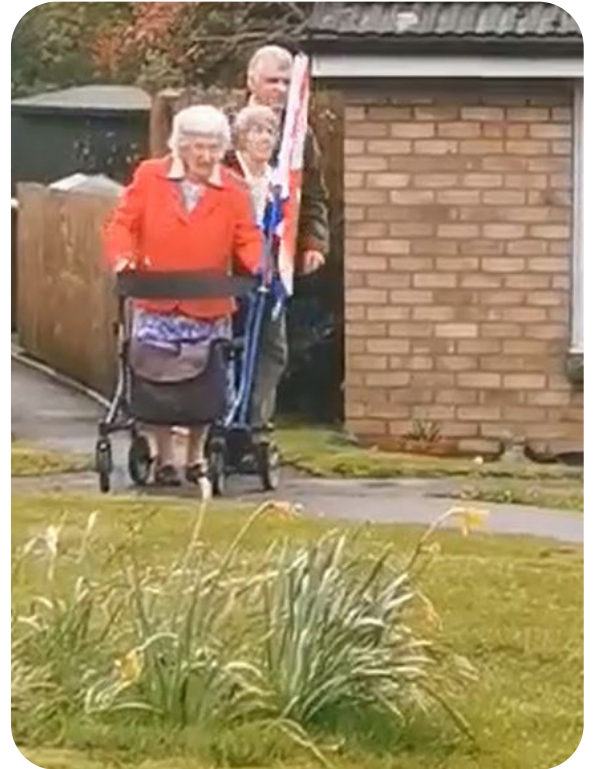
We're currently building our customer portal, which we will be testing with a group of our involved customers and once they're happy with it, we'll be making it available to all customers - watch this space!

We want to know your thoughts and ideas on what we are doing well and not so well to improve and grow. Look out for our surveys; they help form some of the data we use in this report.

See our latest consultations at connexus-group.co.uk/aboutcontact/community/be-involved

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How are we spending your money

Not-for-profit

At Connexus, we invest all the profits made back into delivering our services, maintaining existing customers' homes, as well as building affordable new homes across Herefordshire and Shropshire.

2020 proved to be a challenging year for many due to the Coronavirus pandemic. Connexus, like many businesses, frequently stress-test for financial risks and are pleased to have a strong A3 Moody's financial agency rating, making us financially sound and resilient.

What is Social Value?

Social value is the quantification of the relative importance that people place on the changes they experience in their lives. This reviews the full net value of our intervention through services we provide which enhance the lives of both our customers and our communities.

Connexus is committed to supporting sustainable rural communities in Herefordshire and Shropshire, and so we want to see this social value figure increase year on year. Since 2019 our Social Value has risen from £5,795,623 to £26,245,626 - a 353% increase.



Social Value

£26,245,626

What is Value for Money?

Ensuring good value for money is central to the delivery of our services across the communities we serve.

During the year we've recorded £598,319.75 of Value for Money Savings with Connexus colleagues continuously reviewing and improving the way they work, creating a culture of strong performance. We look for ways to save costs on shared travel, negotiated fees with contractors, and much more. This links to the way we do things and our delivery of permanent efficiency savings following merger, in 2020/21 these totalled £1.443m as a result of becoming Connexus.



Value for money

£598,319.75