



Social Impact Report 2017-2022



Produced for Ark Housing by Gauge Impact
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Gauge Impact[®]

Social Impact Measurement
Research Evaluation

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I.0 Executive Summary

Ark Housing is one of 20 registered Housing Associations operating in Northern Ireland. Providing a range of general housing, residential care and homelessness services, Ark has ambitious plans to grow its housing stock to 1,000+ units by 2024. In 2017 Ark set out a five-year strategy to take the organisation to 2022, built around five key strategic themes and 18 desired outcomes. As it embarks on its next five-year strategy, the organisation has procured an independent review of the impact it made between 2017-2022 and the contribution its efforts have made to society, the economy in Northern Ireland and the lives of its tenants and residents.

The review covers a period when Ark Housing (and the rest of the world) had to deal with the unprecedented and exceptional circumstances brought on by the global coronavirus pandemic in March 2020 and at the time of writing, the recovery from that, economically and socially, is still being navigated.

Ark Housing's Corporate Strategy 2017-2022

The strategy set out five key strategic themes as follows:

1. Leading Employer
2. Better Homes, Greater Diversity
3. Engaged Communities, Greater Impact
4. Service Excellence, Satisfied Customers
5. Corporate Governance, Sustainability

Eighteen desired outcomes were detailed against those themes, with positive indicators for each, enabling Ark to establish measurements against a range of KPIs and so track progress on a quarterly basis and report annually.

Key findings

1. In terms of being a **Leading Employer** and investing in its people, Ark steadily increased measures of employee engagement, satisfaction and retention levels over the course of the strategy period. Feedback in annual staff surveys shows a growth in **employee engagement** from 43% pre-strategy (2015) to **85%** in 2021.

Likewise, **staff satisfaction and loyalty** grew during the period from a low of 18% in 2015 to **73%** in 2021. **Staff retention** reached **98%** in 2021/'22, while **sickness absence halved** from a high of 4.8% in 2017/'18 to **2.4%** in 2021/'22.

2. On the theme of **Better Homes, Greater Diversity**, Ark Housing set out a goal to build 180 new homes during the strategy period. By the end of March 2022 it had built **218 new homes**, taking its stock levels to **605** at the end of the period, with a further 380 homes in development. This takes Ark some considerable way towards its revised goal (revised in 2019) of 1,000 homes in management by 2024. It also points to a **growth in stock** of some **56.5%** over the five-year period.

The **economic impact** of Ark's Social Housing Development Programme (SHDP) can be calculated as a very significant **£141.33 million** benefit to Northern Ireland¹, based on almost £50m being invested in building new homes.

Diversity of place has been achieved as Ark has extended its geographic reach from eight to **10 Council areas** since 2017, with Mid-Ulster the only untouched area to date. Likewise, the types of accommodation on offer are diverse, with general needs, sheltered, supported and homeless housing stock all within Ark's portfolio.

The majority of homes are in **urban areas (78%)**, with 22% in rural areas.

Energy efficiency levels as measured by **EPC ratings** are high, on average a **C** rating, compared with an average D rating across the rest of the UK.

¹ [Every £1 spent on UK construction creates £2.92, says CBI - Construction Management](#)

Investment in property improvements since 2017 totals some **£3.893 million** – with a ratio of 2:1, planned to response. Within this, **90 homes** have been **adapted** to cope with disabilities and physical impairments, making life easier and more comfortable for tenants.

3. The theme of creating **Engaged Communities and Greater Impact** was understandably impacted in the second half of the strategy period with the arrival of Covid-19 and the restrictions it places on organising events and social occasions. Nonetheless, a key goal – the creation of a Tenant Participation (TP) Strategy and Tenant Forum – was achieved and this Forum is starting to shape how Ark communicates with and engages its tenants. In empowering tenants in this way, Ark has had to accept that some of the goals set out in the corporate strategy will not be easily achieved in the ways they had expected and a more consultative approach and slower pace has had to be embraced.

Around **17%** or **111** tenants have opted-in to some form of engagement with Ark through a **register of involvement**. Despite the restrictions on social gatherings, **810** different **community events and activities** were held across the five years, providing a range of opportunities for residents and tenants to meet, learn, play or socialise.

4. To help determine **Service Excellence, Satisfied Customers**, Ark carries out annual Tenant Satisfaction Surveys and throughout the period covered by the strategy, has received excellent feedback. At the request of the Tenant Forum, in 2021, this survey was carried out independently, leading to a drop in results across most categories measured. Nonetheless, **overall satisfaction** in 2021 was **80%**.

When benchmarking itself on tenant satisfaction against the HouseMark STAR² survey, Ark comes above the median in five out of 10 categories and equal to or above Quartile 1 in two. Also, when benchmarking against HouseMark for other operational indicators, Ark performs well, achieving Quartile 1 levels on average 58% of the time during 2021/22.

100% of the **72 complaints** received during the five-year period were successfully resolved at either the first or second stage and occupancy levels had increased to **98%** by the end of the strategy period, marking high standards of customer service.

5. For the final strategic theme, Corporate Governance and Sustainability, Ark performs particularly well, increasing its turnover, income and surplus significantly. Most notable is an increase of **£33m** in **HAG** against a goal of £11m. **Investment in new homes** was set to reach £21m by 2022 and instead reached **£54m**, generating significant social and economic benefit for Northern Ireland.

Regulatory financial assurance was achieved annually throughout the term from the Department for Communities and consistently sound internal audit reports were received and approved by funders and the Board.

On governance, significant time and effort was expended during the period to make governance structure more robust, introducing committee structures, producing a comprehensive Governance Manual and overhauling risk management processes. Regulatory governance standards have also been maintained, with Ark meeting the required standards in each annual Regulatory Framework assessment.

² [Housemark - The Future in Focus](#)

2.0 Introduction

In 2017, Ark Housing published a five-year strategic plan, to take it to 2022. The plan set out key strategic themes and proposed outcomes to help Ark achieve its Vision and Mission. That plan is the subject of this Impact Review.

The purpose of the review is to assess to what degree Ark met the proposed outcomes set out in that strategy and to what impact it has had on the social housing sector and wider society in Northern Ireland through its efforts and investments.

The report has been produced for Ark Housing by Gauge Impact, part of the NOW Group of companies, and was undertaken by Gauge associate Gillian McKee. It is accompanied by a shorter Impact Report visually highlighting the key impacts and achievements of Ark Housing over that period of time.

3.0 About Ark Housing

Ark Housing was first established in 1987 as Down & Connor Housing Association, changing its name in 1999 to reflect both its history and growing ambition.

Ark Housing is one of 20 registered Housing Associations operating in Northern Ireland. Providing a range of general housing, residential care and homelessness services, Ark is typically more diverse in its offering than many other Housing Associations of similar size. It currently owns and manages housing schemes across 10 of the 11 Northern Ireland Council areas, providing 605 units of accommodation ranging from one to four-bedroom houses, rooms in residential schemes for the elderly and including homelessness support through accommodation for 60+ families as well as floating support for more than 200 families presenting as homeless.

Ark is led by Chief Executive Jim McShane, supported by three senior directors and comprising a staff team of around 40+ people. In 2021, the organisation moved to new premises which will allow room for the potential growth that may be required to help it achieve its ambitious goal of owning and managing 1,000 homes by 2024.

Ark's Vision, Mission and Values

- Vision:** Making a positive difference by empowering people and communities
- Mission:** In partnership, provide quality homes and support services to meet housing need and contribute to the well-being of communities
- Values:**
- Progressive** – Forward-thinking, supporting change and transformational
 - Respect** – Treat everyone with dignity and esteem
 - Integrity** – Maintain the highest professional and personal standards
 - Diversity & Equality** – Value diversity & equality in all that we do
 - Excellence** – Strive to deliver the highest standards of quality and customer care

4.0 Methodology

To assess the impact of Ark Housing's Corporate Strategy 2017-2022, we first need to identify what outcomes the organisation intended to achieve. That this was set out within the strategy at the outset was enormously helpful in completing this report, as Ark Housing had stated clear intentions and suggested how these would be measured. Furthermore, for the most part, they had set KPIs and gathered data throughout the period of the strategy, meaning that an enormous amount of information was readily available.

A review and analysis of this data formed the bulk of the approach to completing this impact review, supplemented by interviews and conversations with the Chief Executive Jim McShane and members of his senior team as well as requests for clarification or further data and information as required.

Each of the five strategic themes and 18 corresponding outcomes was supported by a series of indicators within the strategy. These provided a guide for the source of the data against which that outcome could be measured. On a number of occasions whilst reviewing the data, additional sources of information to indicate the degree of achievement of an outcome were uncovered, particularly in relation to employee survey results and so these have been included in the report where appropriate.

Whilst Ark Housing had already carried out its own review of the strategy, the external input of an independent 'third party' in the form of Gauge Impact adds further credibility to the findings of this impact review, endorsing many of the claims made by Ark Housing in its annual performance reviews and drilling deeper in some cases to relate the impact to societal benefit. The work on this project was carried out during June and July 2022.

Limitations

It should be noted that most of the data used in this impact report was compiled by Ark Housing and not gathered independently. Exceptions include independently audited annual reports and accounts and external information sources on housing provision in Northern Ireland, as referenced throughout.

Given the timescales and brief provided, this impact review does not include primary research such as interviews with end users and so some assumptions have to be made as to the positive impact of the growth and investments achieved. Tenant satisfaction surveys do go some way towards mitigating this potential shortcoming, however.

5.0 Strategic Context

As outlined in Ark Housing's 2017-2022 Corporate Strategy, the strategic context in which the strategy was developed was a challenging one and the period of delivery for the strategy more volatile than might ever have been conceived at the time of its development thanks to the Covid pandemic which struck in 2020.

The reclassification of Housing Associations by ONS in 2016 to designate them public bodies had the potential to hamper the growth necessary to meet social housing need. This reclassification put at risk the borrowing powers of Housing Associations, making it likely that banks would become reluctant to lend. In 2020, this issue was settled with the introduction of the [Housing amendment Act](#) which limited the control of the Department for Communities over Housing Association's, averting this risk.

Other significant policy and legislation taken into consideration when the Corporate Strategy was being developed includes the Social Housing Reform Programme, the review of Supporting People and the reduction of funding in real terms to the Supporting People programme. Each of these factors, alongside the potential impact of Brexit (unknown in 2017) and wider political context helped shape Ark Housing's framework and prioritisation of strategic themes.

According to the Housing Supply Strategy³ published by DfC in 2021, housing in NI over the last 20 years has been characterised by three underlying trends:

³ [Housing Supply Strategy 2022-2037 \(communities-ni.gov.uk\)](#)

1. A steady **increase in the need and demand** for housing in response to population change and the growth in the number of households.
2. **Affordability issues** linked to a significant increase in the number and proportion of households, individuals, families, workers and students renting privately and an associated relative decline in home ownership.
3. A **widening gap between** the overall **requirement** for new housing (private and social) and the annual **rate of construction**.

Other long-term trends coming to the forefront:

- **Quality & energy efficiency of homes** – construction and retrofitting will play a key role in helping achieve the target of reducing all carbon emissions by 56% by 2030 and 100% by 2050.
- **Quality of place** – much harder to define, but increasingly important – indicators being identified by government.
- **Housing equality** – examples include: older people (75+) are more likely to live in housing that needs more repairs to bring up to standard; more Catholics in housing stress than Protestants, access for those with learning disabilities to live independently. Also intersectionality an issue – gender and caring responsibilities/marital status – so gender can't be looked at in isolation. BAME and other section 75 groups – equality of access and standard of accommodation recognised as issues.
- **Housing stress** – a growing number of people are in need of social housing and on waiting lists. Significant growth in this in recent years. It has more than doubled between 2003 (c13,000) and 2020 (27,745). Also, growth in numbers reported as homeless, which peaked in 2018/19 and has fallen again since.
- **Growth in private rented sector** – the difficulty in accessing mortgages is leading increasing numbers to seek private rented accommodation and so pushing up prices for private rentals and consequently, driving demand for social housing.
- **Supply not keeping pace with demand** – one factor affecting this is changes in the types of dwelling required due to changing demographics, such as an ageing population and more single occupant dwellings being required, so rendering estimates of projected need lower than reality. Better scenario planning is needed based on demographic information.

Looking forward, the New Decade, New Approach⁴ document published by the NI Executive in 2020 outlines that housing is likely to be a new priority in any updated and revised Programme for Government (PfG). Unfortunately, the lack of a working NI Executive at the time of writing means we don't yet have that PfG, but nonetheless, the intention is clearly set out in that document and in the consultation framework for the PfG.

These trends, referenced in the strategic context of the Corporate Strategy⁵ helped to shape the strategic themes developed by Ark Housing and to drive the revised ambition, set in 2019, to have 1,000 homes in management by 2024. It is against the backdrop of these factors that we assess in this impact review how well Ark Housing has performed over the course of its five-year strategy and to what extent it has achieved what it set out to do.

⁴ [2020-01-08 a new decade a new approach.pdf \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)

⁵ [210x210-Corporate-Strategy-0617.pdf \(arkhousing.co.uk\)](#), p9

6.0 Strategic Themes

The Corporate Strategy outlined five key strategic themes, summarised in the Chief Executive’s Foreword as focusing on: Our People; Our Tenants and Service Users; Service Excellence; Organisational Growth and Financial Sustainability.

Eighteen desired outcomes were detailed against those themes and the degree of impact for each theme has been analysed and detailed in the remainder of this section of the report, based on the data and evidence available.

1. Leading Employer
2. Better Homes, Greater Diversity
3. Engaged Communities, Greater Impact
4. Service Excellence, Satisfied Customers
5. Corporate Governance, Sustainability

6.1 Leading Employer

This theme focuses on what Ark Housing does to engage and invest in its people. This has been a key priority for Ark Housing during the strategy period and demonstrates a recognition by the senior team that nothing can be achieved without healthy, productive and well-developed staff who feel valued.

Ark Housing set itself four desired outcomes for this strategic theme:

1. Our staff are highly motivated, engaged and satisfied
2. Our staff are recognised and rewarded for their contribution
3. Our staff enjoy a healthy work-life balance
4. Our staff are empowered and feel valued

	Desired Outcomes	Positive Indicators
Outcome 1.1	Our staff are highly motivated, engaged and satisfied	Increased staff retention rates

Outcome 1.1 – Our staff are highly motivated, engaged and satisfied

Staff retention figures show a steady increase during the period of this Strategy, with a full 21% increase between 2017 and 2022.

How much of a factor the Covid pandemic has had on the increased figures for 2020/21 and 2021/22 is uncertain, though it is likely to have contributed to people’s preference for staying with their current employer to at least a small degree. That said, the trend was already in the upward direction prior to the pandemic.

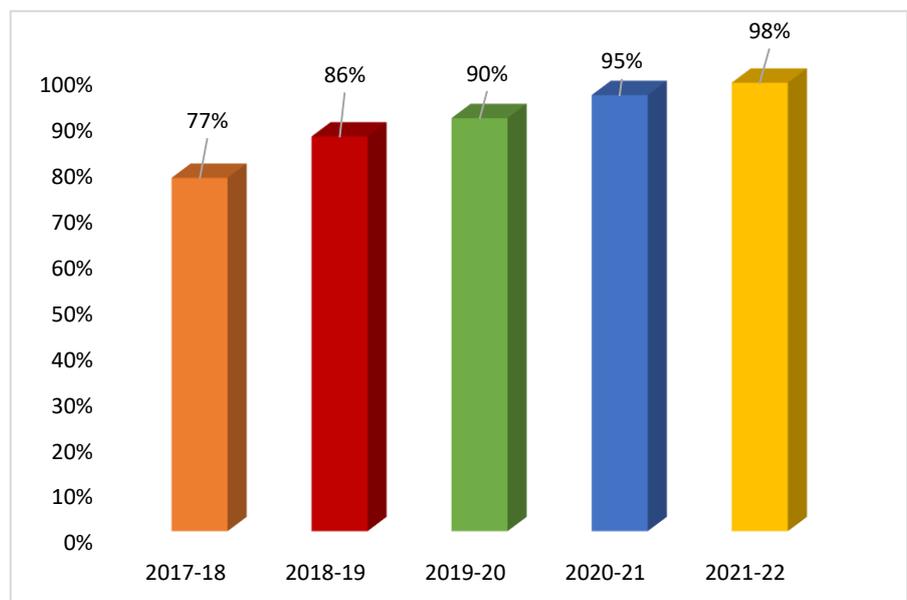


Fig.1: Staff retention

While staff retention rates do provide a useful measure of this outcome, it should be noted that retention across all organisations is likely to have been enhanced in the early stages of the Covid pandemic, with staff less likely to move due to the high degree of uncertainty in 2020/21.

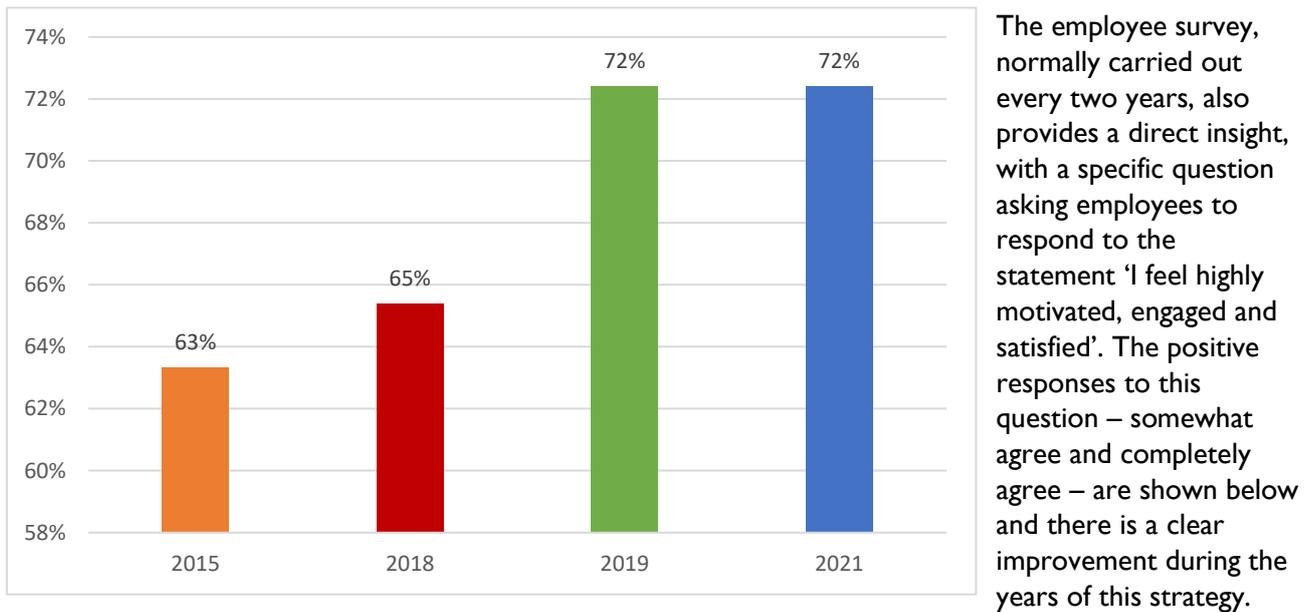


Fig 2: Employee motivation, engagement and satisfaction

Collating the negative, neutral and positive responses to four key questions in the survey enables us to demonstrate employee engagement and as can be seen from the graph below, there has been a growing positive trend in engagement, particularly since 2019.

The questions which make up this index ask employees to rate their level of agreement with the following statements:

- I am proud to tell people I work for this company
- Overall, I am satisfied with this company as a place to work
- I rarely think about looking for a new job with another company
- I feel valued and recognised for the work I do

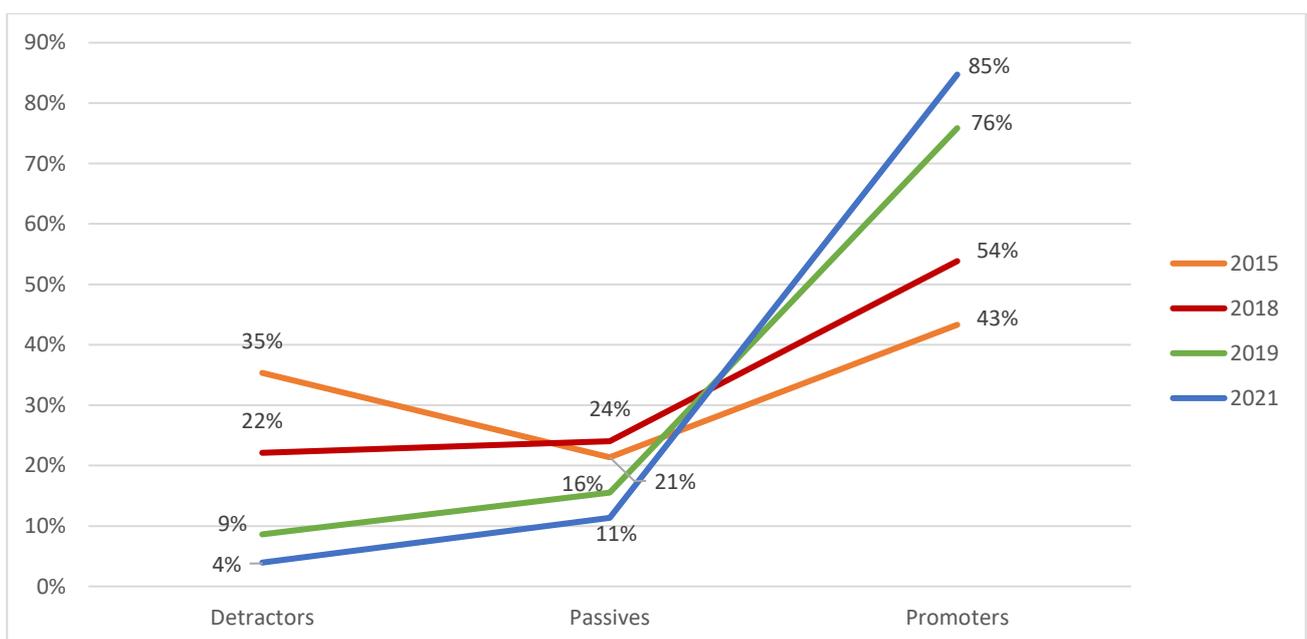


Fig 3: Employee Engagement Index

	Desired Outcomes	Positive Indicators
Outcome 1.2	Our staff are recognised and rewarded for their contribution	Increased staff satisfaction / approval ratings

Again, staff surveys show a growth in positive feedback from employees during the five-year strategy period, culminating in 72% selecting either somewhat or completely satisfied in response to the statement 'I feel valued and recognised for the work I do'.

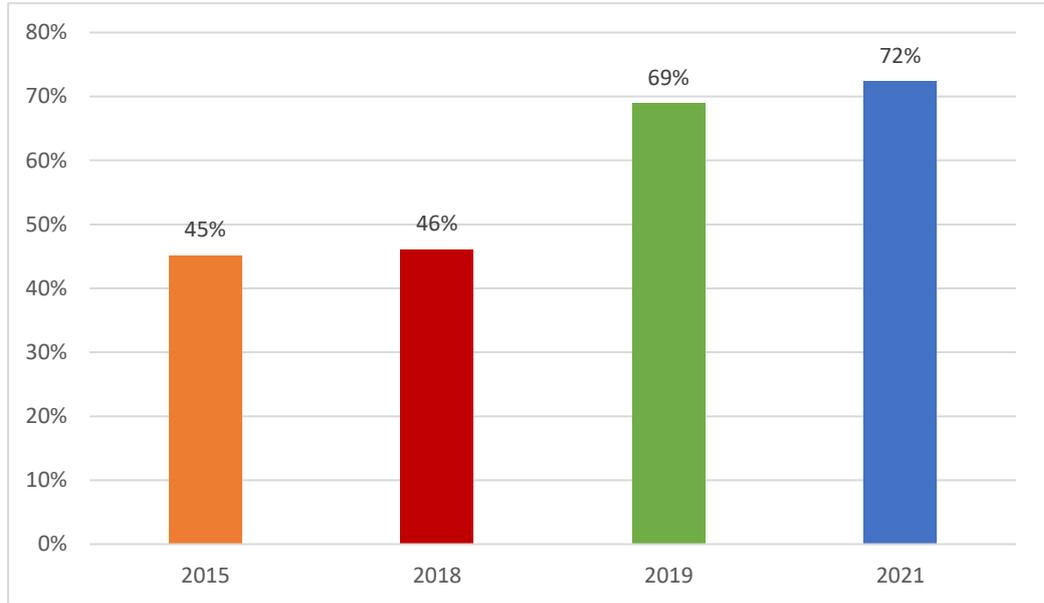


Fig 4: Employee recognition and value

Looking at a combined staff satisfaction and loyalty index based on the responses to two questions:

- I rarely think about looking for a new job with another company
- I feel valued and recognised for the work I do

Shows a considerable positive change from a low of 18% positive responses in 2015 to 73% in 2021. This is something the organisation should take pride in, notwithstanding that a wider analysis of the survey results indicates that room remains for further improvement, particularly around communication and involvement.

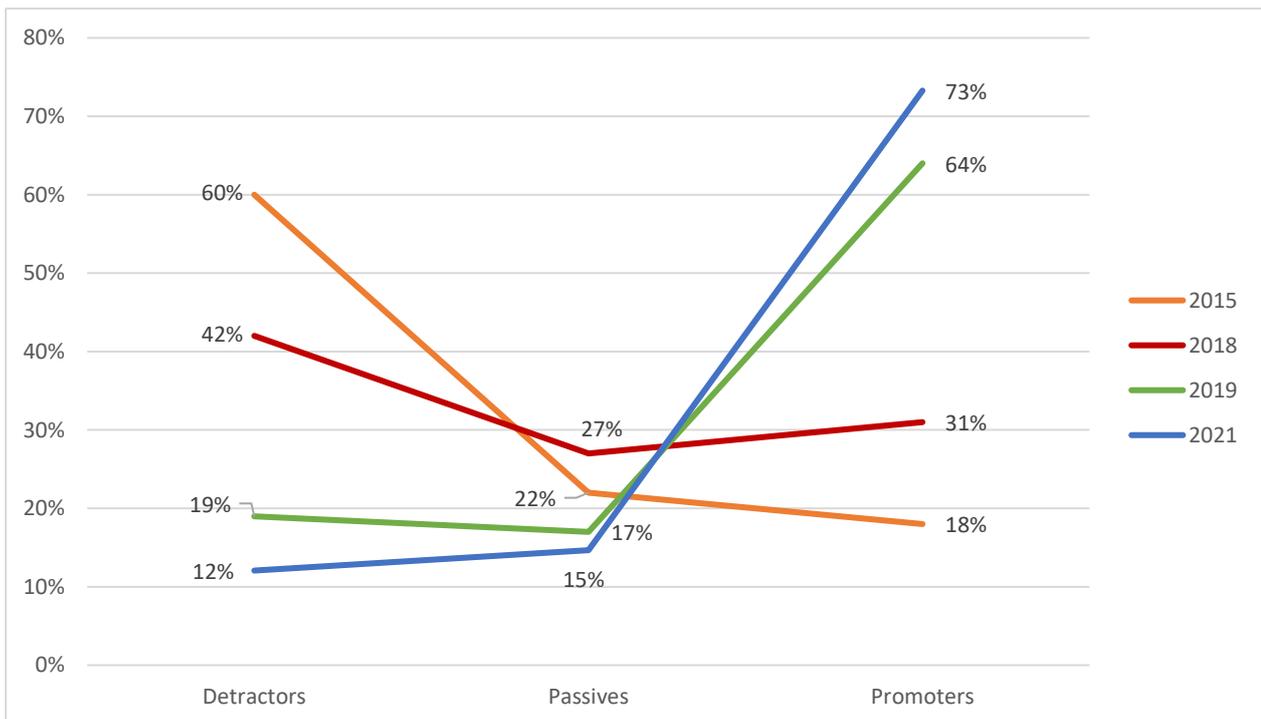


Fig 5: Staff satisfaction & loyalty

	Desired Outcomes	Positive Indicators
Outcome 1.3	Our staff enjoy a healthy work-life balance	Lower sickness absence rates

The proposed metric of lower sickness absence shows a general reduction over the period of the strategy, dropping from an annual rate of 4.8% in 2017/'18 to a low of 2.3% in 2019/'20 before rising slightly again in 2020/'21 to 2.8% and settling back down to 2.4% in 2021/'22. Given the target KPI of keeping sickness absence below 5%, Ark Housing has stayed within target throughout the strategy timescale, achieving very low levels below 3% since 2019.

The anomaly of Covid in 2020/'21 may of course have impacted the slightly higher level in 2020/'21, but the increase is still well within target.

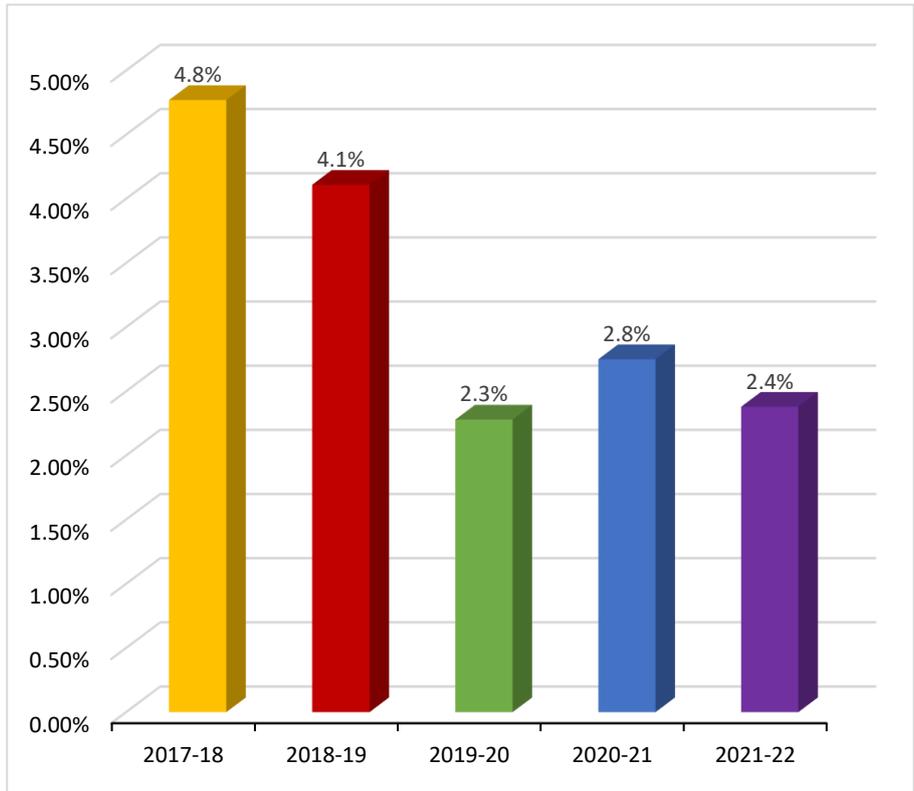
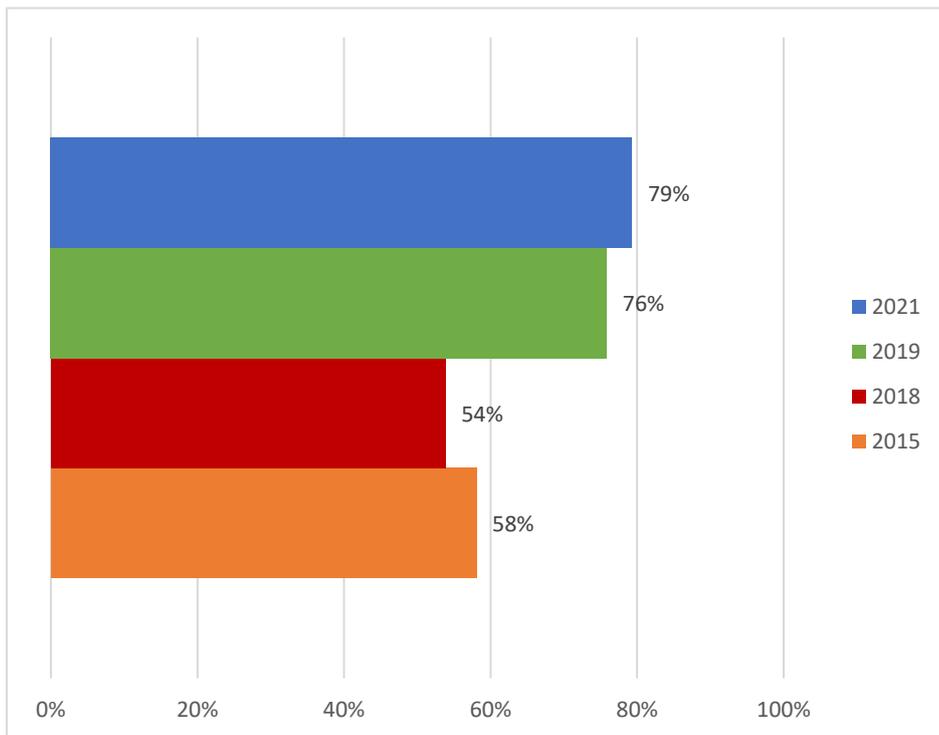


Fig 6: Sickness Absence



Another question asked on the employee survey provides a particularly useful insight into how Ark Housing has performed against this outcome, as employees were asked specifically how much they agreed with the statement 'I enjoy a healthy work-life balance'. 79% of respondents in 2021 either somewhat or completely agreed with the statement, with only 1 person (3%) somewhat disagreeing. Since 2015, the positive response to this question has grown from a low of 54% in 2018 by 25% to a high of 79% in 2021.

Fig 7: Work-life balance

	Desired Outcomes	Positive Indicators
Outcome 1.4	Our staff are empowered and feel valued	Increased learning & development opportunities for staff

The proposed metric for this outcome is increased learning and development opportunities for staff. Many of these are measured in the section on Opportunities for Growth and the responses to key questions from that section are shown in Fig 8 below.

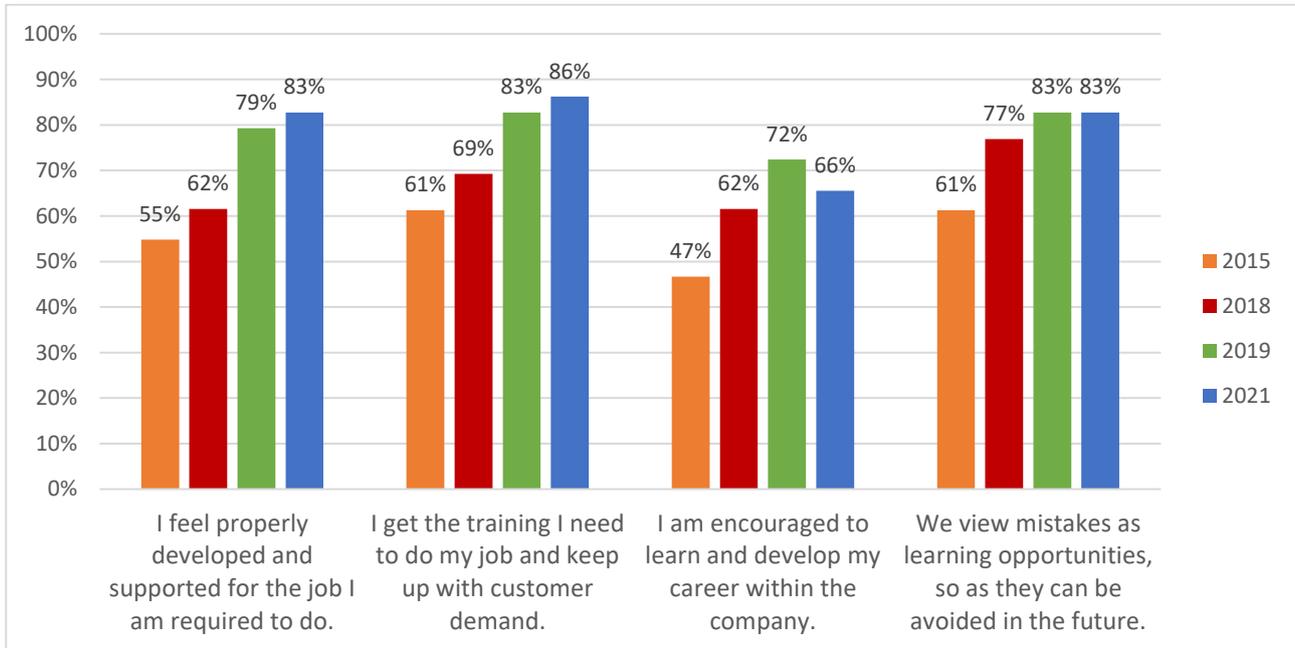


Fig 8: Opportunities for growth

In general, we see an encouraging upwards trend in the positive responses to these questions, with one exception on the statement ‘I am encouraged to learn and develop my career within the company’, which dropped from a high of 72% in 2019 to 66% in 2021. Given the distraction of the pandemic in 2020/21, it is likely that learning and development may have had a slightly reduced focus during that time, potentially contributing to the lower score.

Whilst opportunities for growth are a useful metric, one question in the survey directly asks employees how much they agree with the statement ‘I feel empowered and valued’ and this is worth reviewing. The positive responses to this question peaked in 2019, dropping slightly from 79% to 73% in 2021. This drop may in part be accounted for by the need for employees to work from home during much of 2020 and 2021, which provided all employers with a challenge in terms of keeping staff motivated and engaged and the remoteness from the office may further have made it more difficult for some staff to pursue development opportunities in the normal way.

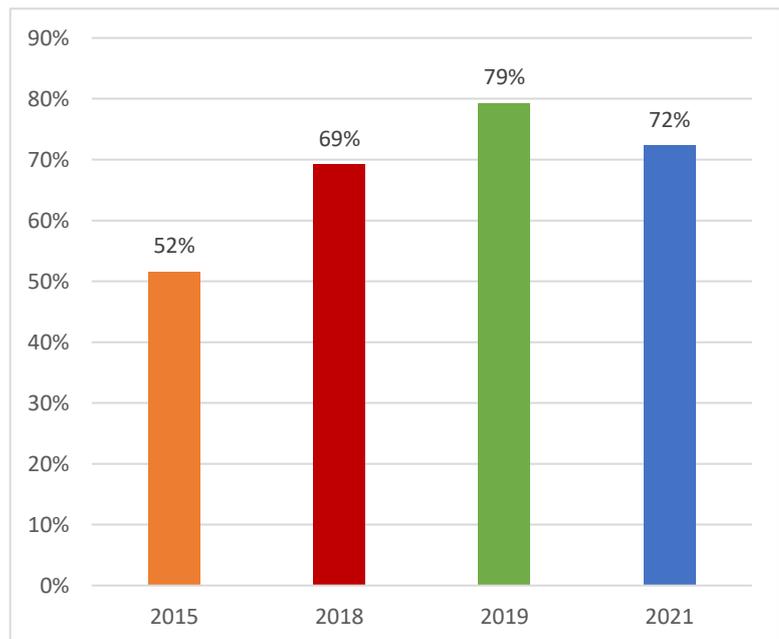


Fig 9: Staff feel empowered and valued

6.2 Better Homes, Greater Diversity

Ark's mission is "to provide quality homes and support services to meet housing need and contribute to the wellbeing of communities. When the strategy was being developed, 37,586 people were on the waiting list for social housing in Northern Ireland, with a further 18,628 presenting as homeless.

Through this strategic theme and the associated outcomes listed below, Ark Housing has worked hard to play its part in addressing the issue and has had considerable success.

At the start of this strategic period in 2017, Ark Housing owned and managed a portfolio of 389 homes across eight Council areas in Northern Ireland. The stated goals on numbers of homes and investment in these outlined in the corporate strategy was driven by the five-year rolling financial plan set in 2016, which detailed the following goals:

- Investing £21m in building new homes and improving existing properties
- Providing approximately 180 new homes

A revision to the approach in the 2019 review of the financial business plan led to the development of more ambitious targets, most notably a goal of owning and managing 1,000 homes by 2024. A key driver for this revision was the realisation by the CEO and Board that a more ambitious approach was needed to help address the growing need for social housing in Northern Ireland and that Ark Housing was well placed to respond.

Ark Housing set itself five desired outcomes for this strategic theme:

1. We have provided more homes for people in housing need
2. Our SHDP has had a significant social & economic impact
3. We have diversified our service offering
4. Our homes are sustainable and energy efficient
5. We have improved our tenant's homes

	Desired Outcomes	Positive Indicators
Outcome 2.1	We have provided more homes for people in housing need	Increased growth in housing stock

By the end of March 2022, at the conclusion of the period covered by this strategy, Ark Housing had a total of 605 homes in management (completed), with a further 380 on site (in development), exceeding the target of providing 180 new homes and also getting some considerable way towards the goal of 1,000 homes by 2024 which was set in 2019 when key metrics were revised and enhanced.

By the end of March of each year	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	Total increase
Units developed	37	28	28	57	68	+218
Total homes owned and managed	423	453	480	537	605	N/A
Growth in stock (<i>units developed as % of units owned</i>)	9.6%	6.6%	6.2%	11.9%	12.7%	56.5%

Table 1: Housing stock increases

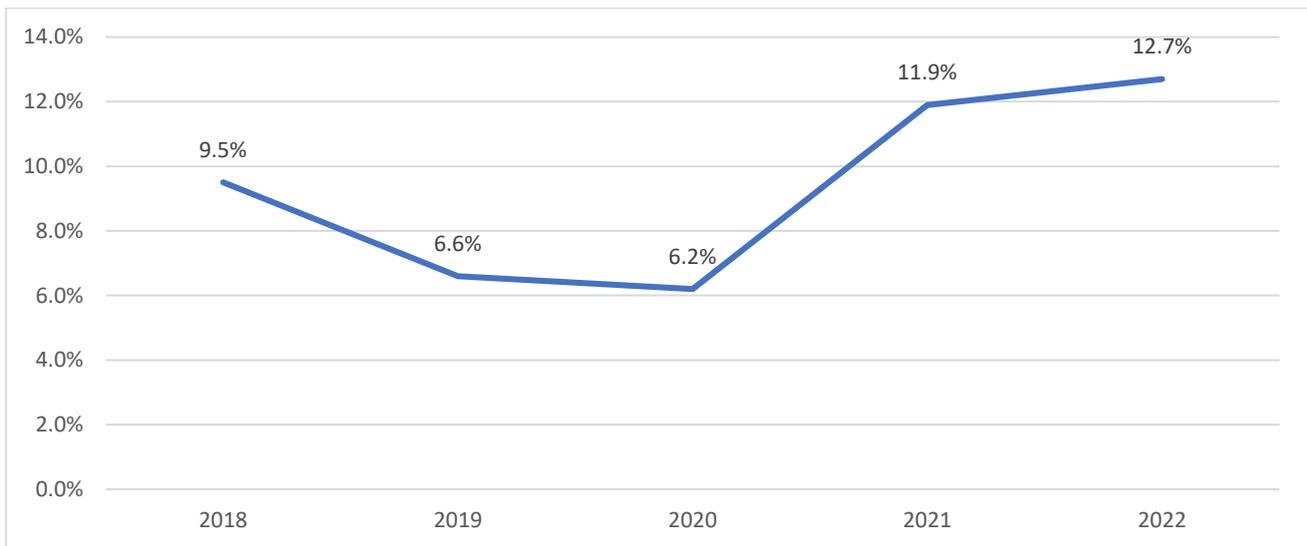


Fig 10: Growth in stock

	Desired Outcomes	Positive Indicators
Outcome 2.2	Our SHDP has had a significant social & economic impact	Social & economic impact of SHDP measured as significant

One measure of the social impact of Ark Housing's Social Housing Development Programme (SHDP) is through the implementation of **social clauses** on new build contracts. In many cases, the schemes fall below the threshold for social clauses, but for those that fall within it, the following metrics apply:

- Ravara Court Bangor – 1 permanent employment placement. A bricklaying student completed a 12-week Training for Success placement, after which the sub-contractor employed the student in paid, permanent employment.
- Strand Road Derry – 2 apprentices employed to date. Completion of the contract will deliver 150 Buy Social points, with 118.7 points delivered to date.
- Ogle Street Armagh – Apprenticeship electrician currently on site.
- Abercorn Road Derry (Tillies & Hendersons) – Contract will deliver 988 placement weeks for trainees, apprenticeships and/or students. The total Buy Social points in the contract is 1,900.

Key standards met during this strategy period in relation to Ark's SHDP:

- 70% of new homes within the SHDP have been design and constructed to fully meet lifetime home standards⁶.
- 70% of new homes within the SHDP have been design and constructed to fully meet Secured by Design (SBD) standards⁷.
- 5.5% of new homes within the SHDP have been designed to full wheelchair accessibility standards.
- 13.4% of new homes provided within the SHDP were located in rural areas.

⁶ Lifetime Homes consists of standards that have been developed to ensure that a home is flexible, adaptable and accessible - and that there is added comfort, convenience and safety for tenants and visitors.

⁷ Secured by Design (SBD) is the official police security initiative that works to improve the security of buildings and their immediate surroundings to provide safe places to live, reducing the opportunity for crime and the fear of crime, creating safer, more secure and sustainable environments. [Secured By Design](#)

Economic Investment

Using data from audited annual reports and accounts, a total of £50m was invested in new build construction and components during the five-year strategy period. With £48.4m of this total invested in new properties under the SHDP, this brings an estimated **economic benefit to Northern Ireland of some £141.33m** based on a study by the CBI and Oxford Economics that calculates a benefit of £2.92 for every £1 invested in construction⁸. The remaining £1.6m was invested in planned upgrades of existing properties.



Fig 11: Economic benefit of Ark Housing investments

	Desired Outcomes	Positive Indicators
Outcome 2.3	We have diversified our service offering	Delivery of new services

Diversity of place was achieved as Ark Housing further extended its geographic reach, developing homes across 10 Council areas, with Derry City & Strabane and Armagh, Banbridge & Craigavon becoming the latest Council areas under development in 2020/'21. Only Mid-Ulster to date remains undeveloped.

Council Area	Homes in Management (March 2022)	Homes in Development (March 2022)
Antrim & Newtownabbey	38	-
Ards & North Down	142	32
Armagh, Banbridge & Craigavon	-	56
Belfast City	258	36
Causeway Coast & Glens	15	12
Derry & Strabane	-	193
Fermanagh & Omagh	10	-
Lisburn & Castlereagh	33	28
Mid & East Antrim	30	7
Mid-Ulster	-	-
Newry, Mourne, & Down	79	16
Total	605	380

Table 2: Homes by Council area

⁸ [Every £1 spent on UK construction creates £2.92, says CBI - Construction Management](#)

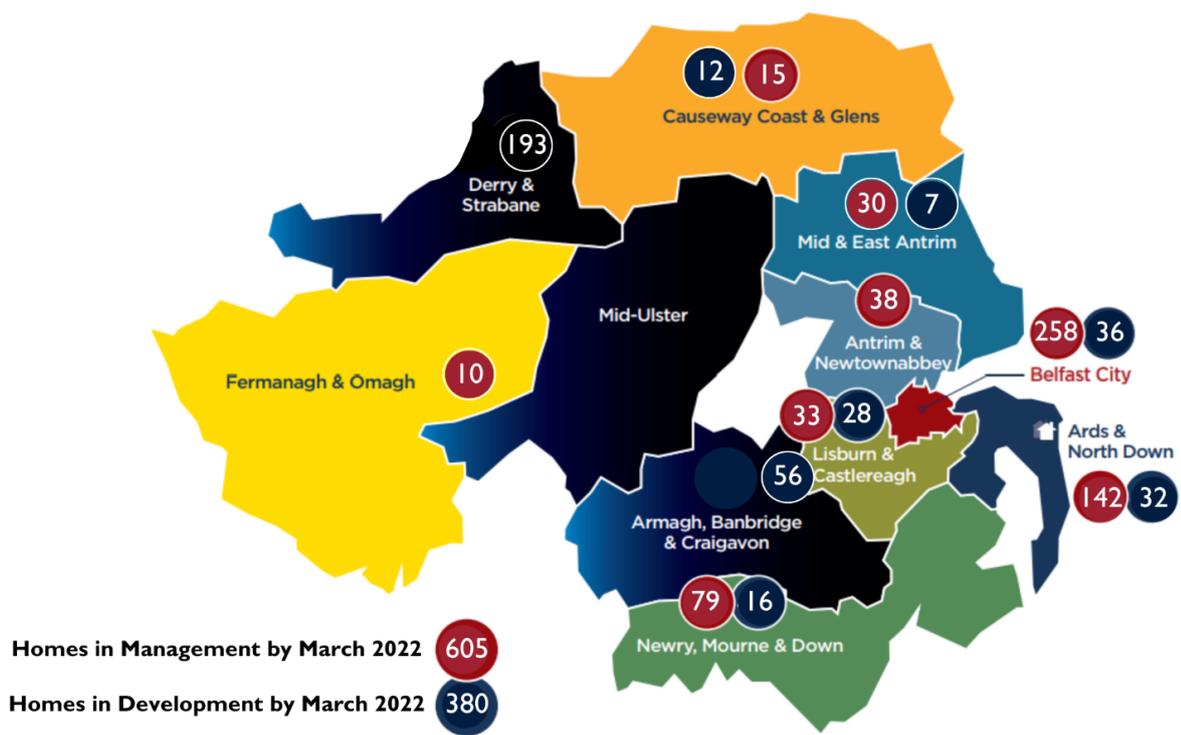


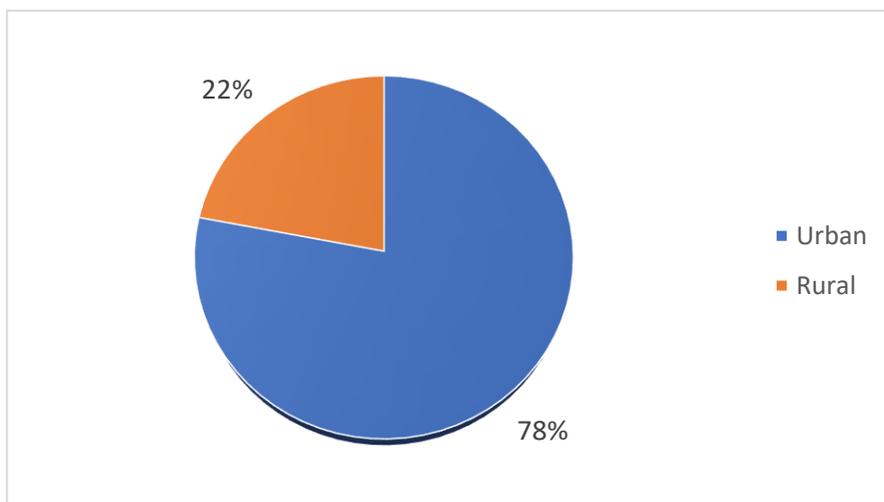
Fig 12: Map showing homes in management/in development by the end of March 2022

Diversity of type was also addressed, with a range of general need, sheltered, supported and homeless units developed by the end of the strategy period and 90 homes adapted for disability or changing needs.

Housing stock comprises a mix of 1, 2, 3 and 4 bed homes for families and individuals as well as bedspaces in residential accommodation for elderly residents.



Fig 13: Housing stock by type – March 2022



The majority of homes are in urban locations, with a ratio of almost 4:1, urban to rural.

Fig 14: Urban/Rural split

	Desired Outcomes	Positive Indicators
Outcome 2.4	Our homes are sustainable and energy efficient	Improved average home energy ratings and affordable rents

Using Energy Performance Certificates (EPCs) as a measure of energy efficiency, Ark Housing has received average EPC ratings of between 70 and 83 between 2017 and 2022, equating to C or B ratings. The average EPC rating for buildings in England and Wales is D (55-68), suggesting that Ark Housing’s stock is well above average.

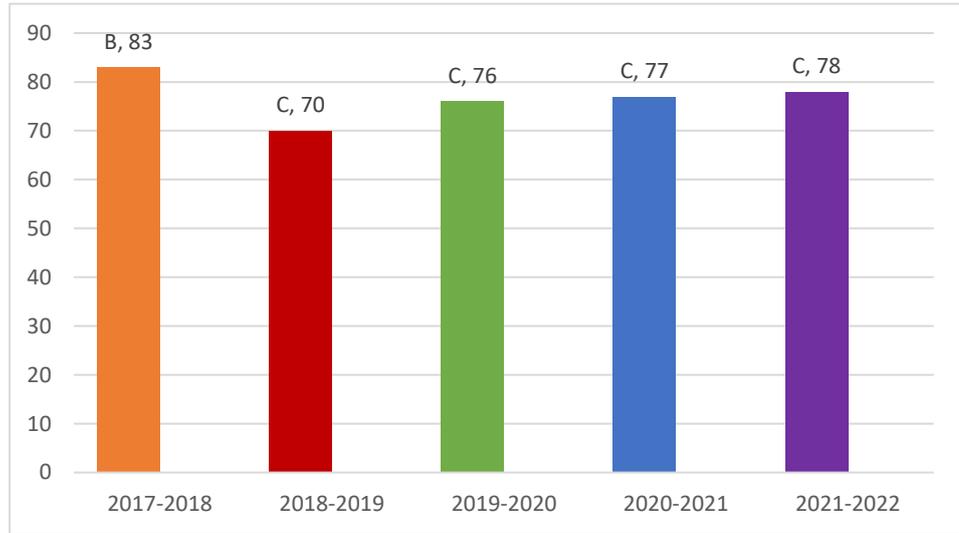


Fig 15: Average Energy Performance Certificate Rating

The dip in score in 2018/19 is due to the purchase of older housing stock that year, but as can be seen, the score improves in the subsequent years and by the end of 2022 is again rising towards the threshold for a category B assessment (81-91). The need for increased focus on energy efficiency is likely to grow in the next five-year strategic plan, as the drive for lower emissions and a net-zero future becomes an imperative for developers across all sectors of housing provision.

The sustainability of Ark homes is measured via **affordability** – a difficult concept to benchmark against as no accepted standard exists for the social housing sector in Northern Ireland. The Department for Communities Housing Statistics for 2020/21 put average weekly rents at £104 for the private sector and £82 for the social sector⁹. The average weekly rent across all Ark Housing properties at this time was £88.89, slightly above average.

For a further assessment, the table below compares Ark Housing rents with Apex, Radius and Choice across two recent financial years for benchmarking purposes, using information from their publicly available annual reports. As can be seen here, Ark is around the middle in these comparisons, however it should be noted that *affordability* is not being measured here as that would require much wider application of criteria and customer feedback than this study allows.

Average weekly rent	2018/19			2020/21		
	Ark	Apex	Radius	Ark	Apex	Choice
1 bedroom	£59.86	£66.62	£77.85	£67.39	£69.69	£63.68
2 bedrooms	£86.50	£87.75	£89.91	£92.65	£92.18	£83.48
3 bedrooms	£94.80	£99.90	£99.44	£102.78	£103.58	£97.82
4 bedrooms	£101.83	£107.28	£101.82	£112.60	£112.84	£107.54

Table 3: Weekly rent comparison

Looking across the five years of the strategy, we can see small increases in rent during that time, with percentage rises reducing to below 3% in 2021/22, in recognition of the challenges facing tenants due to the increased cost of living following the pandemic and other broader political and economic factors.

⁹ [Northern Ireland Housing Statistics 2020-21 \(communities-ni.gov.uk\)](https://communities-ni.gov.uk/northern-ireland-housing-statistics-2020-21)

In the 2021 independent STAR (Survey of Tenants and Residents) research commissioned by Ark Housing¹⁰, 80% of respondents were happy that their rent represented value for money.



Fig 16: Average rent by house type

	Desired Outcomes	Positive Indicators
Outcome 2.5	We have improved our tenant’s homes	Delivery of property investment programme

Ark’s property portfolio undergoes investment on an ongoing basis to ensure maintenance and improvement works keep the properties to a high standard.

Planned maintenance is budgeted for annually and might include electrical, gas or boiler servicing, fire safety measures, inspections or upgrades to heating systems, boilers etc or making adaptations to help those living in the property do so more comfortably.

Response maintenance refers to requests to fix or upgrade broken or sub-standard equipment.

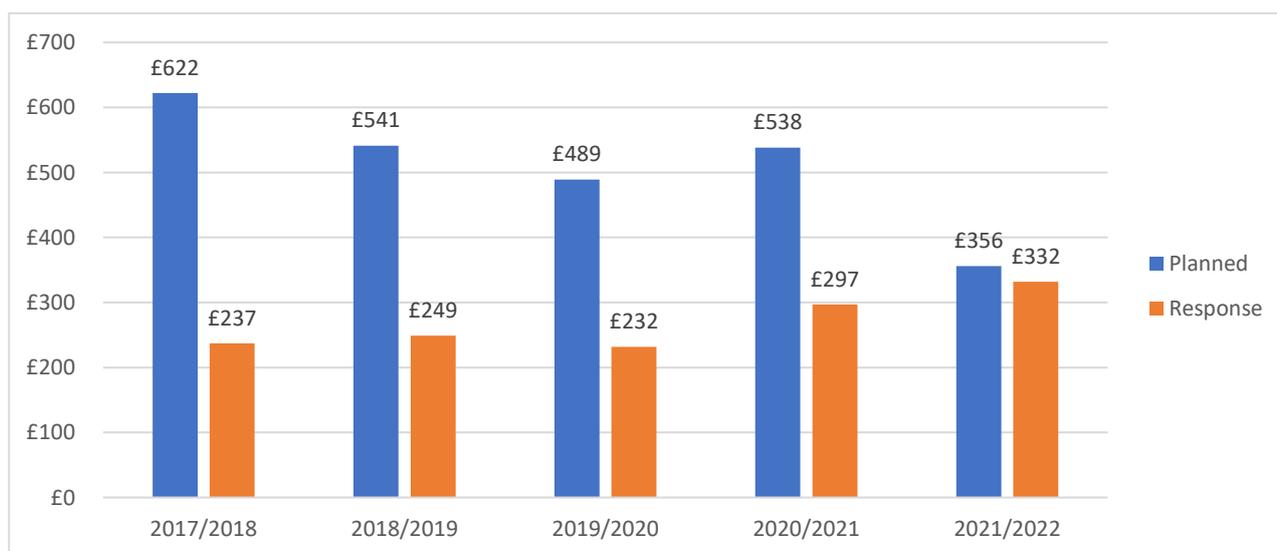


Fig 17: Property improvement investments in £000’s

¹⁰ Survey carried out by independent research agency Aquity in 2021.

Since 2017, a total of £3.893m has been invested in improvements – £2.546m in planned and £1.347m in response. The figures for planned maintenance above include the £1.6m spent over the course of this strategy in upgrades such as new kitchens. This demonstrates a **ratio of approximately 2:1** for planned to response maintenance was in place during the strategy period.

On response maintenance, these are classified as Emergency, Urgent or Routine and the performance of the response measured annually is shown in Fig 18 below.

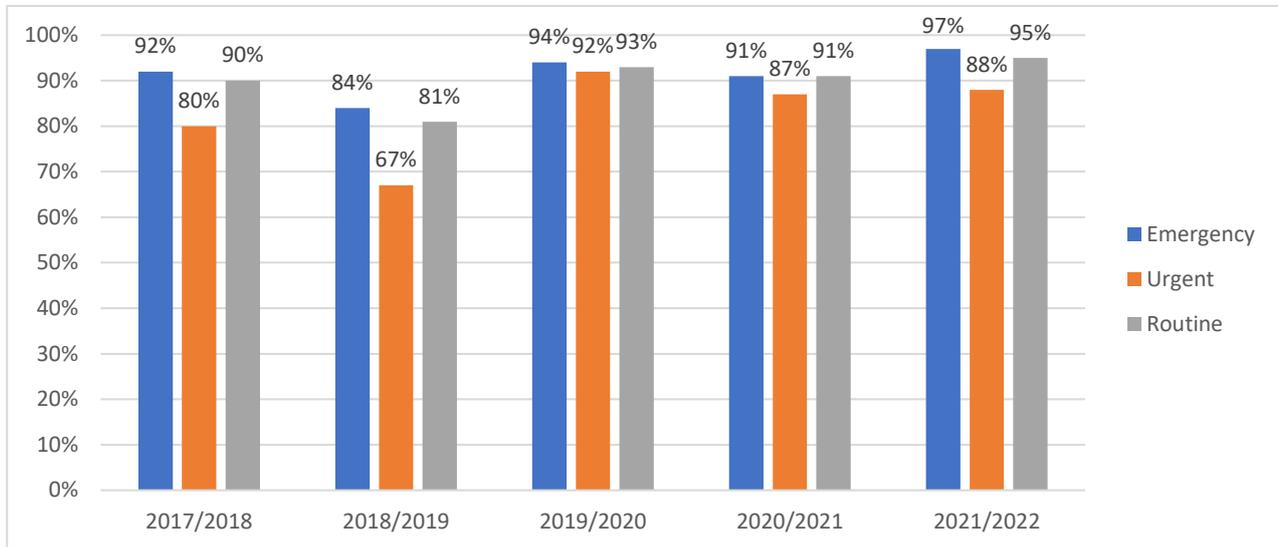


Fig 18: Response performance

With the exception of a drop to 67% response on urgent maintenance in 2018/19, performance has stayed steadily high at 80% or more and has improved in the latest year to all-time highs for emergency and routine maintenance of 97% and 95% respectively.

Further investment in properties was undertaken as part of an adaptation service to facilitate tenants with disabilities or physical impairments. This resulted in some 90 adaptations across the five-year period, with a total investment of £106,867

90 homes adapted at an investment of £106,867

When Ark Housing commissioned an independent survey of residents in 2021 (Survey of Tenants and Residents – STAR)¹¹ 40% of tenants responded. 21% felt that timescales for repairs could be improved, while 76% were happy with repairs and maintenance, suggesting some room for improvement may still exist. Previously, in Ark Housing’s own tenant surveys in 2018 and 2020, 93% and 91% respectively were either very or fairly satisfied with response maintenance services. It is difficult to be sure that questions were framed in the same way in each survey, therefore direct comparisons cannot accurately be made. Nonetheless, on average, three quarters or more of residents were happy with response maintenance times during this period.

76% of residents happy with repairs and maintenance
2021 Independent STAR Survey

¹¹

6.3 Engaged Communities, Greater Impact

Social housing, done well, is about building strong communities as much as it is about providing safe, warm and secure homes. In tandem with the development of Ark's Corporate Strategy, a Tenant Participation Strategy was also developed to cover the period 2017-2022. The delivery of that strategy is critical to the success of strategic theme 3 – Engaged Communities, Greater Impact. The Tenant Participation (TP) Strategy set out how Ark Housing intended to involve tenants in the design, delivery and continuous improvement of services over those five years.

Alongside the TP Strategy, annual action plans and KPIs were developed for each year, with a Tenant Participation Governance Structure produced and in 2020, the creation of a Tenants' Forum.

Ark Housing set itself three desired outcomes for this strategic theme:

1. Our tenants and residents have shaped our policies and practices
2. Our homes and services have enhanced people's lives
3. Our homes and services have brought people together

	Desired Outcomes	Positive Indicators
Outcome 3.1	Our tenants and residents have shaped our policies and practices	Increased tenant engagement through successful delivery of our Tenant Participation Strategy

The TP Strategy developed in 2017 was aligned with the Department for Communities' Tenant Participation Strategy¹² launched in 2016. Key objectives outlined in Ark Housing's TP Strategy were to:

- Enhance participation, communication and consultation through the development of new tenant engagement methods, innovative systems and effective processes
- Ensure that tenant involvement is central to the operation of the Association
- Establish and support links between tenants and organisations working in the wider community and to promote and enhance community cohesion

Resources were allocated to support the successful delivery of the TP Strategy and annual action plans and KPIs developed. From 2019/20, these KPIs were reported in the Audited Annual Report and Accounts, however, in the 2021/22 Report, there was a change in the reporting methodology, making it harder to compare performance year on year. That said, between 53% and 75% of KPIs were achieved in relation to tenant and community engagement for those years, which is not insignificant, taking into account the impact of Covid on community gatherings and events from March 2020.

A Register of Residents introduced as part of the TP Strategy provides tenants with four options for differing levels of involvement, ranging from receiving updates and information from Ark Housing to serving on the Board. The KPI set is to have more than 10% of residents register for one of these levels. In 2020 and 2021, this was exceeded, with 20% and 17% registering in those years respectively. This dropped in 2022 to just 6%. It is difficult to assign a reason for this without more detailed information being available. The 2021 STAR survey referred to earlier in this report suggests little cause for concern however, as 82% of residents claimed that Ark Housing "kept them engaged in a way that suited them".

	2017-18	2018-21	2022	Totals
Level 1 – Information & Communication	7	71	10	88
Level 2 – Group Structure – local Tenants' Group participation	4	8	2	14
Level 3 – Formal Based Tenants' Forum	3	5	1	9
Level 4 – Governance Structure – Ark Housing Board	0	0	0	0

Table 4: Register of Residents' involvement

¹² [A Tenant Participation Strategy for Northern Ireland: 2015 to 2020 \(communities-ni.gov.uk\)](https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk)

The introduction of a Tenants’ Forum in 2020 was intended to be a primary driver of tenant participation, however, it was established shortly before the Covid pandemic hit in March 2020 and so progress was hampered somewhat in the first year, with online meetings slowing engagement a little initially according to Director of Housing Laura O’Dowd. Also according to Laura O’Dowd, there were some challenges in delivering everything outlined in the TP Strategy given the heavily tenant-led approach. She said “The Tenants’ Forum is very much tenant-led, so Ark Housing’s plans have been compromised to some degree as we found they didn’t always align with the tenants’ needs. Tenants seem to want to deal with things as and when they arise rather than planning too far ahead.”

Some key metrics covering the five-year period are outlined below:



Fig 19: Key highlights of TP Strategy

In addition, it seems that strong foundations have been created to support the continued growth of tenant engagement into the next five-year strategy period. Presumably, now that the Forum is fully established, it will be involved in setting the goals for the next TP Strategy and this will ensure tenants and residents directly help to shape policies and practices moving forward.

	Desired Outcomes	Positive Indicators
Outcome 3.2	Our homes and services have enhanced people’s lives	Increasing social impact and tenant wellbeing over the lifetime of the strategy

Conclusions on this outcome can only be partially drawn from the tenant satisfaction surveys as there were no questions asking specifically about either increased social impact or tenant wellbeing. Assuming that positive social impact is achieved by tenants and residents attending Ark Housing activities and events, it can be taken as a positive indicator that in 2019/’20 and 2020/’21, 56% and 34% of tenants respectively attended scheme events and activities. These are the only two years of the five-year strategy period for which specific data exists.

Within the tenant satisfaction surveys in 2018 and 2020, questions on how satisfied tenants are with the overall quality of their home can surely be taken to indicate a degree of positive social impact. That 93% in 2018 and 97% in 2020 were fairly/very satisfied, placing Ark in the first quartile when benchmarked against the HouseMark STAR Survey¹³ demonstrates a positive impact that can be reasonably assumed to contribute to higher levels of wellbeing. Research has shown a positive correlation between mental and physical health and having a safe, warm home of a good standard¹⁴. The same research, by The Health

¹³ [Housemark - The Future in Focus](#)

¹⁴ [How does housing influence our health?](#)

Foundation, shows that every £1 invested in housing support for vulnerable people equates to £2 benefit through costs avoided to public services. That being the case, it is fair to conclude that with such a significant majority of Ark Housing tenants satisfied with the quality of their accommodation, a social benefit and wellbeing benefit are indicated by this metric.

A particular area of Ark Housing’s services where both social impact and tenant wellbeing are addressed is in its **homelessness services**. During the course of this strategy period, a change in the approach to providing homelessness support has meant that more families can be helped. Moving from accommodation-based support to a floating support model in March 2021 allows Ark Housing to deliver support to more families either experiencing or threatened with homelessness per annum for the same cost as before.

In the year from March 2021 until March 2022, Ark Housing supported 170 families through the floating support service and helped 81 of these to move on to secure accommodation.

170 families supported through the Floating Support Service in 2021/22



81 of these moved on to secure accommodation



CASE STUDY

Homelessness Support

Mrs S moved into one of Ark’s homeless family schemes in May 2020 with her 3 children. When she moved into the scheme, she was allocated a Floating Support Worker who worked with her to complete a client/person led needs assessment and support plan. This identified 4 areas of support, including:

- Rehousing close to Mrs S’s work and her children’s school
- Support to ensure benefits are maximised
- Mental Health - supporting Mrs S to ensure that all support services are in place for her and her children
- Community inclusion – supporting the family to engage in wider community activities

Her Floating Support Worker has acted as an advocate on her behalf, liaising with NIHE and ensuring that her housing points are maximised. A key role has been providing ongoing emotional support and reassurance.

Mrs S says “Myself and my children have been homeless from May 2020 because my relationship with their father broke down and we left the home where my children had grown up.

The effect this has had not only on my own mental health but on my children’s, has been soul destroying. I promised them that us living in a hostel would be temporary, but here we are, 20 months later, still living here. From we moved into the hostel, the support we received from the staff has been amazing. We have a brilliant key worker who goes above and beyond to help us in any way that we need. She provides advice on what my options are to try and get my children and I a new home.”

	Desired Outcomes	Positive Indicators
Outcome 3.3	Our homes and services have brought people together	Increased numbers of inclusive community and social events taking place annually

This outcome faced a serious challenge in March 2020 when the UK went into lockdown. For much of the subsequent two years, social gatherings and events were severely curtailed as a result of government guidelines and restrictions. This meant that in the final two years of this strategy period, Covid prevented Ark Housing from running many of the events it would have planned to bring people together and help address this outcome.

In spite of this, 810 inclusive community and social events took place over the 5 years. This included fun days, neighbour days, international food days and more. Resident and tenant meetings are additional to these numbers and are detailed below.

2017/18	77 fun days, 251 engagements, including neighbour days, international food days
2018/19	62 fun days, 154 community & social events
2019/20	240 community & social events, 41 tenant/resident meetings
2020/21	12 community activities (Covid), 4 resident meetings
2021/22	14 community & social events, 22 tenant meetings, 3 Tenant Forum meetings and 6 tenant participation training courses

Table 5: Community and social events held



Fig 20: Community and social events over five years

Events and activities provided range from English lessons to digital inclusion or creative writing sessions, from coffee mornings to trips for young people, from competitions to gardening events and equipment being provided, offering a wide range of engagement opportunities to suit all ages and interests.

It may be useful for Ark to consider other metrics or ways of assessing this outcome in the future, as no questions on the tenants' survey currently address this issue. Assessing this outcome purely by way of counting numbers of events is somewhat limiting, given that it offers no qualitative assessment of the impact of bringing people together. Ark may wish to consider requesting feedback following events or incorporating a question in the annual tenant satisfaction survey to better understand the impact it had on this outcome.

6.4 Service Excellence, Satisfied Customers

This strategic theme focuses on tenant satisfaction and high levels of service across Ark Housing’s portfolio of properties and support.

Ark Housing has set out three desired outcomes for this strategic theme:

1. Our tenants and residents enjoy excellent housing and support services
2. We are recognised as a leading housing association for service and operational delivery
3. We are progressive and forward thinking in our approach to service delivery

	Desired Outcomes	Positive Indicators
Outcome 4.1	Our tenants and residents enjoy excellent housing and support services	Increased tenant and resident satisfaction levels. Lower levels of formal complaints received. Increased occupancy levels

Annual **tenant satisfaction** surveys provide the metrics for outcome 4.1, with a range of areas measured, A change of approach in 2021 to use the services of an independent research body has resulted in lower scores across all areas, but is to be commended as this independence adds credibility to the results, which are still high and above 80 in all but one area (repairs). The Tenant Forum was instrumental in this change.

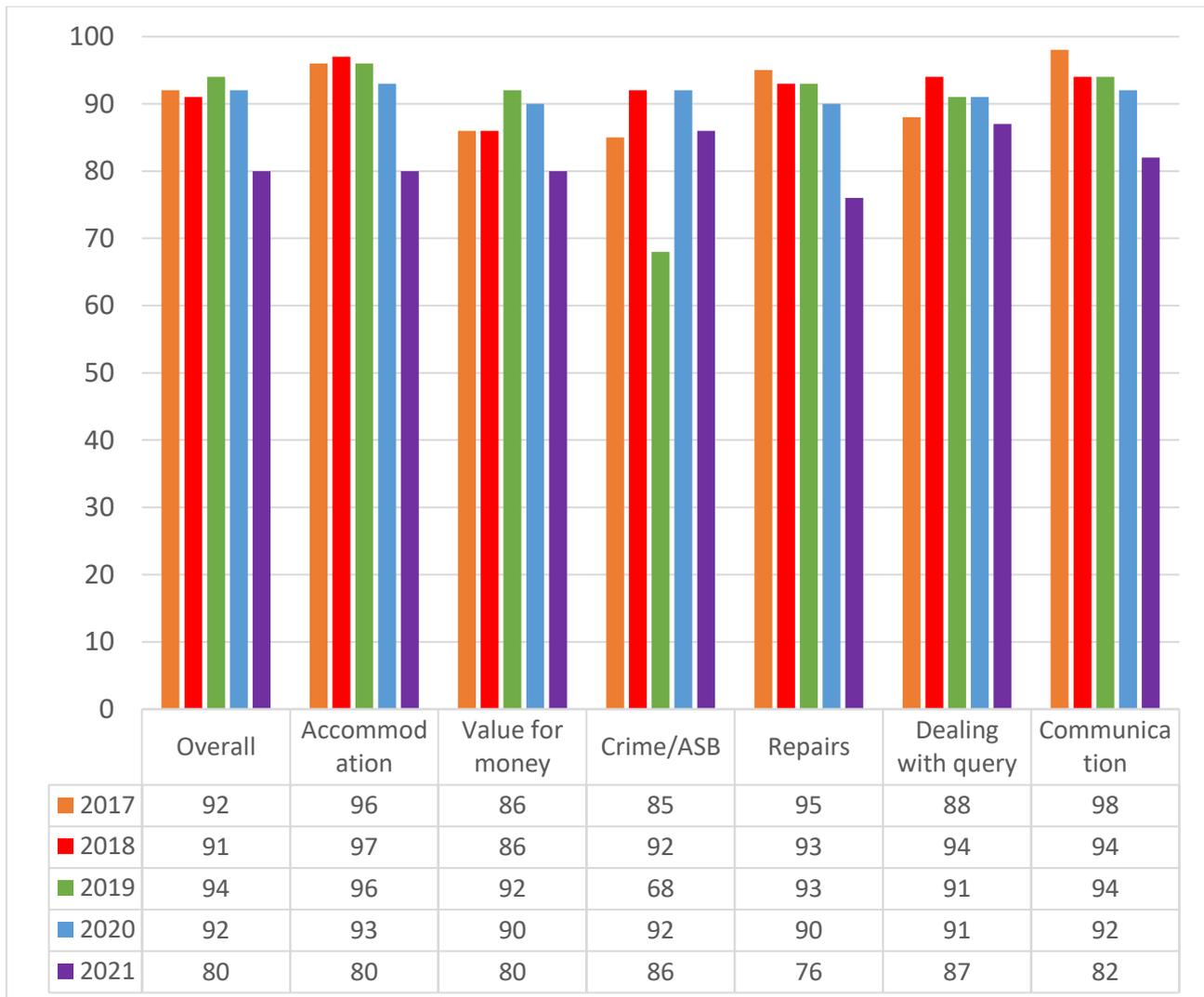


Fig 21: Tenant satisfaction levels 2017-2021

Benchmarking Ark against the HouseMark STAR comparisons for 2021 (the latest year for which both organisations have figures available) shows Ark to be particularly strong when it comes to being ‘easy to deal with’, matching the upper quartile figure of 87%, ‘listening and acting’, with a score of 77%, beating the upper quartile figure and ‘making its views known’, scoring 78% to the upper quartile figure of 79%. This points to support from Ark being considered particularly highly by tenants.

On other metrics, Ark always scores above the lower quartile and in five of the ten areas, performs above the median.

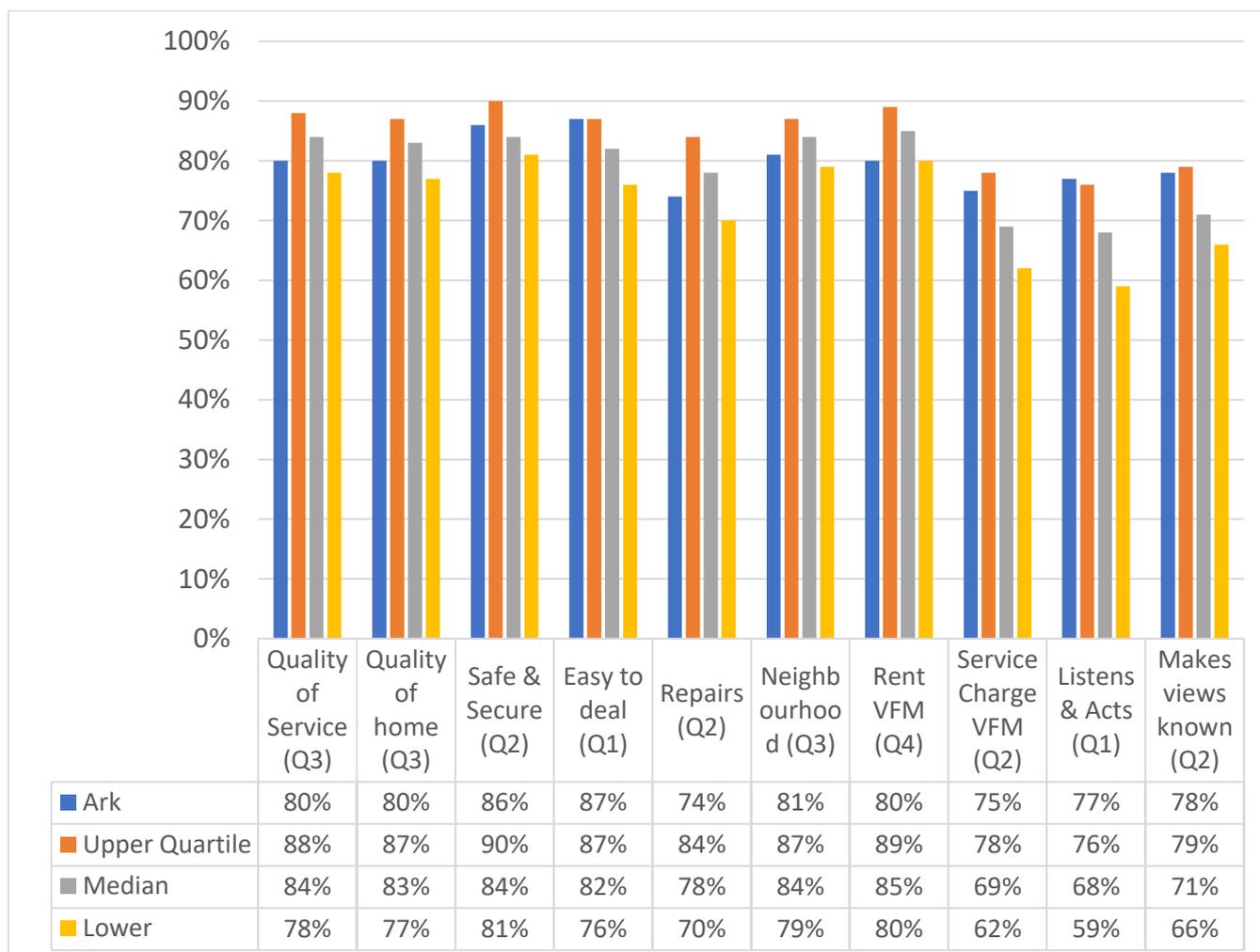


Fig 22: HouseMark STAR Comparison, 2021

- 72 Complaints Received
- 100% of Complaints Successfully Resolved
- 26 Complaints Upheld
- 8 Complaints Partially Upheld
- 36 Complaints Not Upheld
- 2 Complaints Withdrawn

The numbers of formal **complaints** made rose in the last two years of the period, with a total of 72 recorded between April 2017 and March 2022. That said, Ark reports a 100% satisfactorily resolved record each year, with 90% resolved at the first stage in the 2021/22 period and no complaints being referred to the Ombudsman.

It should also be noted that the prevalence of complaints remains very low and below the 1% KPI Ark has set for itself.

Fig 23: Complaints across the strategy period (2017-2021)

**Occupancy levels
by the end of the
strategy period were
98%**

At the start of the five-year strategy period occupancy levels of 96% were reported, rising to 97% by 2019/20 and 98% in 2020/21 and 2021/22.

Client testimonials and case studies gathered throughout the period point to high levels of service and satisfaction and Ark has noted areas for improvement particularly from the 2021 independent STAR survey carried out by Aquity.

CASE STUDY

Client Satisfaction with Support

Family ABB, originally from Spain, was referred to our Floating Support team by the NIHE. The case is still ongoing.

Ark's support included help with:

- Initial presentation of homelessness and information and liaison with the NIHE In regard to their FDA; and help securing single-let accommodation
- Integration into the community (setting up bank account; GP registration; school placements for children – liaison with EA and local school; access for kids into social clubs; family hub referral)
- National Insurance nos; housing benefit application & child benefit application
- Emotional support when family were feeling under pressure
- Provision of google translate when meeting with the family
- Liaison with NIHE to maximise points and pick areas of choice

Ms ABB says *“I am pleased to address you on behalf of my family to thank you for the support you are giving us with your organization, we would have no idea how to do things without your help, thank you for supporting us to be able to integrate into this wonderful country, for being so effective , responsible and cautious in doing things, we are very lucky to have been able to find your organization thanks.”* (Translated from Spanish)

A key area of housing support is Ark's **Homelessness support services**. In 2021 the model changed from on-site support at Moyard House and Roseville – Ark's two homelessness schemes in Belfast – to floating support, enabling Ark to provide support to more families facing homelessness. This was undertaken at no additional cost to the Supporting People programme which funds Ark's homelessness provision.

In 2021/22, using this new model and working in partnership with the NI Housing Executive, Supporting People and community hubs across Belfast, Ark provided homelessness support to 170 families and helped 81 families into more suitable accommodation.

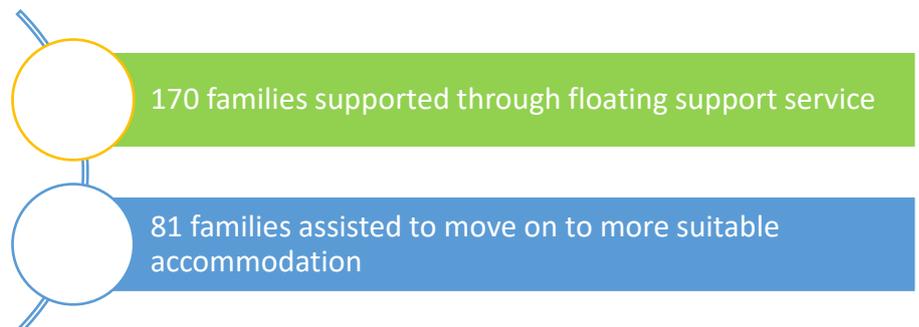


Fig 24: Homelessness Floating Support by end March 2022

“Your support has helped me beyond what I could have asked of anyone, Thank you”
Resident, Moyard House

	Desired Outcomes	Positive Indicators
Outcome 4.2	We are recognised as a leading housing association for service and operational delivery	Consistently ranked in top 10 in annual benchmarking data across 70% of all operational performance indicators

The indicator proposed here has proven difficult to measure against as the chosen benchmark organisation (HouseMark) doesn't use many of the operational performance indicators chosen by Ark's KPIs. That said, it is clear that great effort has been put into creating a comprehensive series of KPIs and reporting against these on a quarterly basis to the Board. A better metric for external benchmarking may need to be identified to be fully able to determine how Ark ranks against competitors within the sector.

From the information available and looking at the final year of the strategy, it is evident that for those KPIs where a comparator in HouseMark is available, Ark Housing achieves scores that would put it in the top quartile of respondents (Quartile 1) 50 – 65% of the time (see Table 6 below). It still therefore would have some way to go to achieve a top 10 place across 70% of indicators.

As can also be seen in Table 6, Ark has achieved between 66% and 84% of its KPIs (shown in green) across the year. Assuming that many of these KPIs will have been set to enable Ark to meet a high-performance standard and benchmark with others in its sector in Northern Ireland, achieving up to 84% of targets is evidence of a strong performance and shows that high levels of service and operational delivery are a priority for Ark Housing.

KPI Quarterly Performance Summary	Jun-21	Sep-21	Dec-21	Mar-22
GREEN	80%	84%	83%	66%
Amber	5%	8%	5%	19%
RED	15%	8%	12%	15%
Housemark Quarterly Performance Summary	Jun-21	Sep-21	Dec-21	Mar-22
Quartile 1	59%	65%	59%	50%
Quartile 2	6%	6%	6%	14%
Quartile 3	0%	12%	12%	18%
Quartile 4	35%	17%	23%	18%

Table 6: KPI and Benchmarking performance 2021/'22

	Desired Outcomes	Positive Indicators
Outcome 4.3	We are progressive and forward thinking in our approach to service delivery	We introduced new ways of working and engagement through the adoption of new technology

The achievement of this outcome has been managed as part of the Tenant Participation (TP) Strategy, enabling the Tenants' Forum members to input ideas and participate in decisions about how service delivery could be improved through the adoption of new technology. As the Tenants' Forum was only

introduced in 2020, progress on this outcome is still underway and various technologies are in development at the time of writing.

This is driven through one of the three **objectives** set out in the **TP Strategy** in 2017:

To enhance participation, communication and consultation through the development of new tenant engagement methods, innovative systems and effective processes.

In 2021 a website working group was established within the Tenants' Forum to review the content, structure and features of the website to increase accessibility and attractiveness to users.

This led to the introduction of a ChatBot and live chat service on the website. This feature is still in a testing phase. A tenant portal is also currently under construction and expected to be introduced in 2022 alongside further website revisions and improvements.

As such, it is difficult to measure the effectiveness of new technologies and ways of working in this review as the work is at too early a stage for assessment. What is clear is that Ark Housing is open to and welcoming of the adoption of new technologies that will make engagement with tenants easier and improve life for residents.

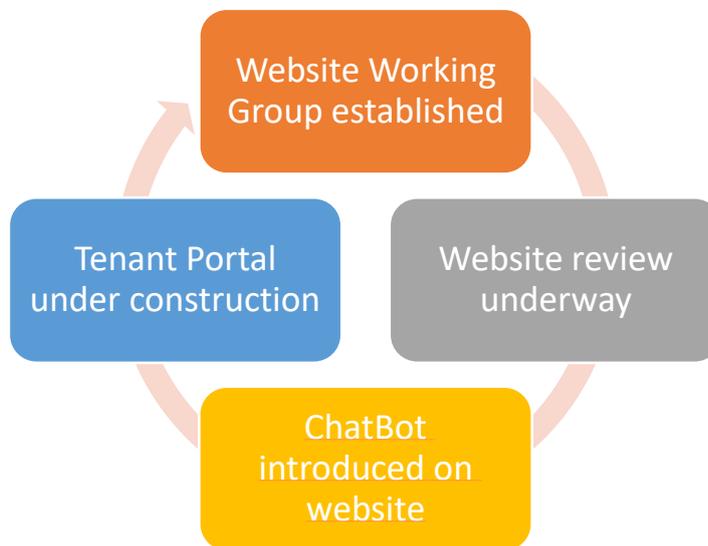


Fig 25: Digital innovation steps to date

6.5 Corporate Governance, Sustainability

The primary consideration within this strategic theme is to ensure financial and governance systems are robust and rigorous. Given that public funding constitutes as significant proportion of Ark’s income, accountability and transparency around this measure is key.

Ark Housing has set out three desired outcomes for this strategic theme:

1. We are a financially sustainable organisation
2. Our financial systems, structures and processes are robust
3. Our governance structure and systems are robust

	Desired Outcomes	Positive Indicators
Outcome 5.1	We are a financially sustainable organisation	Financial targets and indicators on track, rents are affordable and sound short, medium and long-term financial plans are in place

Ark Housing has operated with a growing turnover and surplus over the five years of the strategy as indicated in the graph below. Operating costs, whilst also growing over this period remain at a steady level below the turnover and it is clear from the annual audited accounts that prudent and financially efficient measures have been adopted to ensure budgets are met and that the longer-term financial sustainability of the organisation is protected.

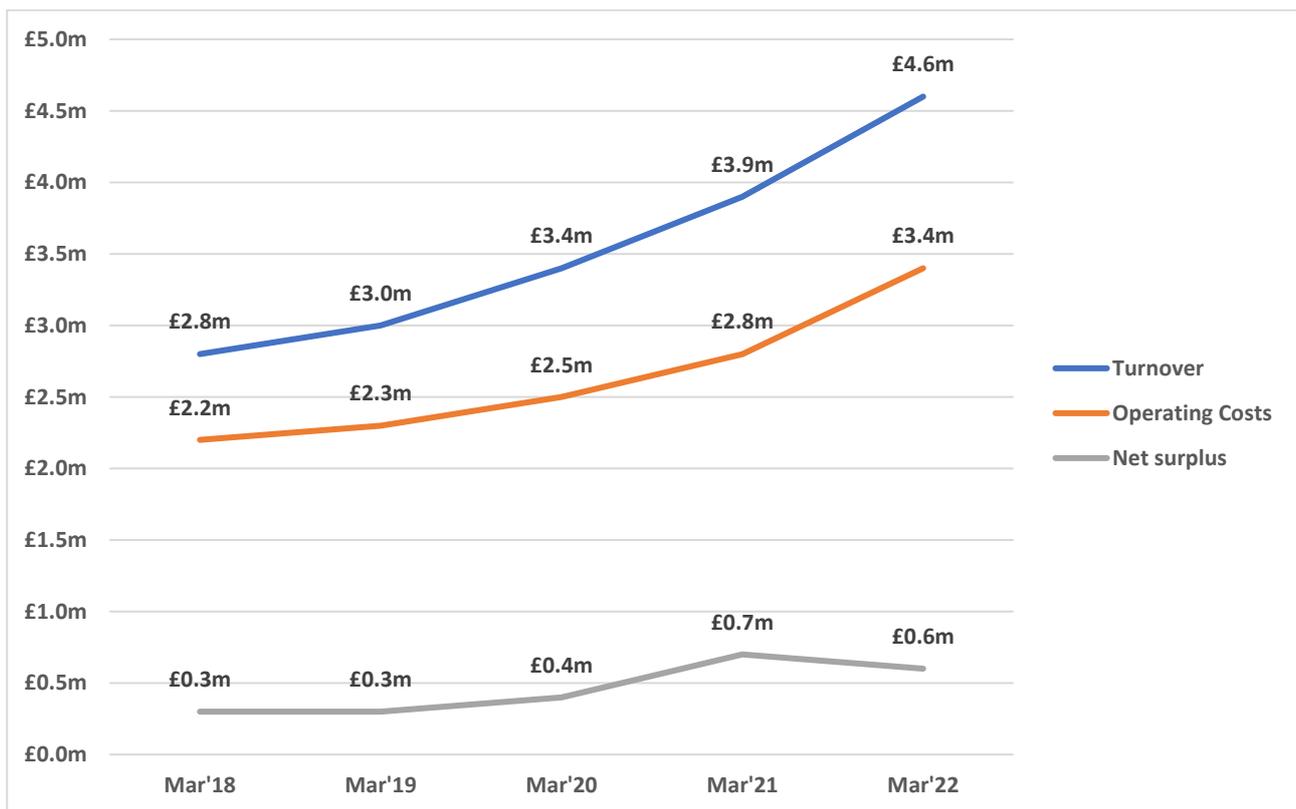


Fig 26: Turnover, operating costs and surplus generated 2017-2022

Financial targets set at the outset of this corporate strategy were all exceeded at the conclusion of the strategy, as shown in Table 7, in some cases doubling or even tripling. Whilst there were occasional periods during the five years when turnover, HAG funding and the numbers of new homes dipped below the target for that year, a reassessment of approach in 2019 led to a more progressive approach to home building being adopted in the second half of the strategy period and all goals being met or exceeded as a result. This, despite the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020/21.

	Goal by 2022	Actual	Variance
Turnover	Almost £4m	£4.6m	+15%
Operating costs	Over £2.6m	£3.4m	+31%
Surplus over 5 years	Approx. £2m	£2.4m	+20%
New homes built	180	292	+62%
Investment in new homes	£21m	£54m	+157%
Private finance	Increase of £10m	£18m	+80%
Housing Association Grants (HAG)	Increase of £11m	£33m	+200%
Components	£500k	£1.6m	+220%

Table 7: Financial targets and outcomes

Similarly positive is the growth in the value of Ark Housing’s fixed assets during the life of the strategy – from a baseline of £31.8m in 2017 to £86m in 2022 – exceeding the target of £52.8m by some 104%.

It should be noted that the targets set in 2017 as part of the corporate strategy were subsequently reviewed and revised in 2019. An assessment by the CEO and Board of the targets and the potential for growth was that a more ambitious approach which took the organisation back to focusing on its stated goal of ‘meeting housing need’, was achievable and so the metrics from the corporate strategy were ‘enhanced’. A new target of having 1,000 units in management by 2024 was set and Ark Housing is currently on track to meet that target, with 605 units in management and 380 in development as of June 2022.

In terms of the **affordability of rents charged**, in the 2020 Tenants’ Satisfaction Survey 82% of tenants surveyed were satisfied with the affordability of their rent, with 90% satisfied that it offered value for money. That said, as outlined in Outcome 2.5, affordability is a difficult concept to measure and benchmark, with no forum existing currently to analyse and track rents charged.

Other financial metrics such as **arrears** have proven more difficult to control, Ark’s KPI for total arrears (% against income debits) has been missed for the last three years, with a high of 7.5% in 2021. That said, regular monitoring and reporting seem to be having a positive impact and this figure came down to 6.8% by March 2022. It is also worth noting that net rent arrears (those debts outstanding after housing benefit and other statutory payments are factored in) remain within target.

	Desired Outcomes	Positive Indicators
Outcome 5.2	Our financial systems, structures and processes are robust	Regulatory financial assurance achieved. Consistently sound internal audit reports received

Regulatory assurance has been achieved throughout the term of this strategy from the NI Social Housing Regulator, the Department for Communities. Two financial standards are assessed and reported on as follows:

Finance Standard 1: Ark Housing has demonstrated that it manages its resources effectively to ensure financial viability is maintained in the short, medium and longer term.

Finance Standard 2: Ark Housing has articulated and delivered a comprehensive and strategic approach to achieving value for money in meeting the organisation’s objectives.

Outcome of Finance Standard – MET

As detailed in the audited annual report and accounts for 2017/’18, 2018/’19, 2019/’20 and 2020/’21, independent audits of the accounts highlight no concerns from the perspective of the two independent auditors appointed during that period – PricewaterhouseCoopers (2017-2019) and GMcG (2019-2021). In

addition, internal audits carried out in 2019/20 and 2020/21 provided further assurance on both governance and financial systems, processes and controls.

At the time of writing, the annual report and audited accounts for the period 2021/22 was not available.

	Desired Outcomes	Positive Indicators
Outcome 5.3	Our governance structure and systems are robust	Regulatory assurance on Governance matters. Consistently sound internal audit reports received

Ark Housing is governed by a voluntary Board of Management, which, during the period of this Corporate Strategy, consisted of between 10-14 members. The Board met between 4-6 times per year as outlined below and a number of sub-committees were also in place as follows:

	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22
Board meetings	4	4	6	6	6
Investment Committee	1	4	4	4	4
Audit, Compliance & Risk Committee	1	4	5	5	5
Governance Committee	n/a	1	2	3	2
Remuneration Committee	n/a	1	1	1	1

Table 8: Board and Sub-Committee Meetings

The gender composition of the Board throughout this period has ranged from 60%/40% to 71%/29% female to male. Board members serve for three years and up to a maximum of nine.

A comprehensive Governance Manual approved in June 2021 provides guidance for board and committee members and the organisation uses the Decision Time software portal to communicate and share important documents and information. The Governance Manual outlines Terms of Reference, roles and responsibilities of board and committee members and a robust range of policy and procedural details that underpin all aspects of governance at Ark Housing. To further strengthen Ark Housing's approach to governance, a Governance Committee was established during the strategy period. Its stated purpose is to "monitor and review the effectiveness, structure and composition of the Board, leading the process for all board reviews, board appointments, succession planning and the development of and amendments to key governance policies."

During the strategy period, the risk management framework was overhauled and a robust corporate risk register is now in place with detailed information on the seven risks identified and the controls in place to manage these risks.

From an external perspective, each year during the period of this strategy, Ark Housing has received positive regulatory judgements from The Department for Communities, meeting the required standards in each Regulatory Framework assessment.

7.0 Conclusions

In its 2017-2022 Corporate Strategy, Ark Housing set out to make a positive difference across five key themes, with 18 Positive Indicators identified against which to measure success. The data and evidence provided and set out within this report points to Ark largely having achieved that aim, in spite of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic from March 2020, which lasted through most of the next two years.

The strategic theme on which this had the most notable impact was 3. Engaged Communities, Greater Impact, as restrictions were placed on social gatherings, thereby reducing the numbers of events that could be held to bring people together. That said, 810 events were still possible during the five-year period. In more recent times however, Ark Housing is finding it a little harder to engage tenants in meaningful participation through its Tenants Forum and other organised group structures.

It should also be noted that in the strategy, Ark Housing set out to have tenants and residents help shape policies and practices (Outcome 3.1), but that until the Tenant Participation Strategy was in place and the structures that support engagement were well established, this wasn't entirely possible. Now that these structures are in place, getting that buy-in to help shape policy and practice should be easier in the next strategy period and any tension between Ark's ambitions and tenants' priorities should be more easily addressed.

Success in terms of the numbers of homes built and the investment attracted during the period was particularly notable, as in both cases, the targets set were exceeded by some considerable margin.

Likewise, employee engagement and satisfaction increased considerably during the period. The challenge now will be to maintain or continue that increase during the next strategy period.

Recommendations

- An observation for future monitoring of strategy and KPIs would be around consistency. **Greater consistency in the specific metrics and the language used** in reporting would be helpful in tracking progress across the strategy period and ensuring transparency. In some instances, the specific details of a KPI changed over the lifetime of the strategy, so consistency in the methodology was negatively affected.
- Before setting positive indicators for future desired outcomes, Ark should **ensure that a method for capturing the data is easily implemented and that any benchmarking data required will be easy to access**. This comment is specifically relevant to Outcome 4.2, shown here on page 27, where the positive indicator is: '*Consistently ranked in top 10 in annual benchmarking data across 70% of all operational performance indicators*'. This proved hard to assess accurately as HouseMark, against whom benchmarking is carried out, does not report against all the same operational performance indicators. It also relates to Outcome 2.2 on page 14, the positive indicator for which is '*Social & economic impact of SHDP measured as significant*'. Ark should try to be clearer on how this will be measured and what metrics will be used.
- Given the differences noted in results when the **tenant awareness survey was carried out by an external body** in 2021, it is suggested that for robustness, this approach is retained in future. Again, consistency in the questions asked and how these are reported, would further aid meaningful comparison.
- For **benchmarking 'affordability'** against other HAs, Ark may find it useful to regularly track and record what others are charging for their rents, as this doesn't appear to be 'officially' benchmarked anywhere.