

Spring 2019

voice

Informative news and advice from Watford Community Housing

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- And more!



watford
community
housing

Abbey View hosts fire training exercise



In order to give the fire crews at Herts Fire and Rescue the chance to practise a realistic training scenario in a high-rise building, they recently carried out a training exercise at Abbey View in Garston.

Herts Fire and Rescue visited the Meriden in March and used an empty flat for the training exercise.

This valuable opportunity allowed the fire service to see first-hand the finer details of what might happen in an emergency situation at a high-rise block. By facing any challenges head-on during a practice scenario, firefighters can learn more about what to do in a real-life fire and consider the solutions available to them.

We're really pleased to be able to work in partnership with Herts Fire and Rescue, and the team were grateful for the opportunity to test their equipment, response and skills.

Universal credit – the latest advice

If you receive Universal Credit, here are some of the key things you need to know to stay in control of your finances this year.

Getting on top of your finances can be difficult, especially since the introduction of Universal Credit. However, there are a number of things you can do to make managing your money a bit easier. Here are some bits of advice that might help.

There are 53 rent weeks this year

This year, there are 53 rent weeks rather than the usual 52. Currently, the Department for Work and Pensions haven't included an extra week in the Universal Credit payments, so you will only receive payments for 52 weeks, even though you will have to pay for 53 weeks of rent. Even if you usually have two rent-free weeks a year, you will still need to pay an extra week's rent this year.

It's important to be prepared for the extra week, so that your rent account stays clear. You can try to add a little extra money to your account throughout the year so that you have additional rent when the time comes. The following advice might also help you if you are struggling to cover costs.

You can apply for an advance

If you're a new UC claimant, you can apply for an advance so you have some money within five days of applying, rather than waiting weeks for your first payment. However, bear in mind that this is a loan, so it will be automatically deducted from your future UC payments.

Alternative payment arrangements

If you're falling behind on rent, you or your landlord may be able to apply for an APA (alternative payment arrangement) which will see your payment sent directly to your landlord. You might also be able to change your payments to get them more frequently, or you can split the payments between yourself and a partner.

Getting a discount on your council tax

If your Universal Credit payments don't cover your rent, you might be eligible to receive a discount on your council tax or be entitled to Discretionary Housing Payments.

Emergency household loans

In emergency cases, such as if vital household goods break or you become unemployed unexpectedly, you might be able to get help from the government. You will have to repay the loan through Universal Credit, but this money may help in a crisis.

You can use food banks if you need to

If you need help paying for food and toiletries, your local food bank can provide you with these items for free. Find your nearest food bank on the Trussell Trust website.

For help or advice, speak to our Tenancy Support Officers on 0800 2182247.



Your services are changing!

Over the past few months, staff and residents have been working to secure new cleaning and grounds maintenance contracts, which will provide you with better services and improved value for money. We are pleased to announce that both new contracts will be managed by Accuro Environmental.

Our cleaning and grounds maintenance contracts cover the communal areas and outside spaces in and around our neighbourhoods. We understand how important these services are to residents and, knowing that our previous contracts were coming to an end, we wanted to put them out to tender to see whether we could achieve higher quality services and improve the value for money we deliver for you.

In order to complete the tender process in a fair way which met regulatory requirements, we asked some of our residents to help staff select a new contractor. Working closely with residents and the Gateway Membership Team, which represents tenants, we reviewed and scored all eight tenders in detail.

This involved visiting and interviewing each company, and looking into feedback from our residents about how these services could be improved. We also worked with professional consultants Echelon Consultancy throughout the exercise.

The result of the process is that new five-year contracts for cleaning and grounds maintenance have been awarded to Accuro Environmental. The company scored highest for both quality and cost-effectiveness, and they will be taking on both the cleaning and grounds maintenance from 1st April.

The assessment for each organisation was weighted slightly in favour of quality (60% on quality, 40% on cost), so that we can be sure you are receiving the best services. Accuro Environmental scored highly in quality and cost-effectiveness for both cleaning and grounds maintenance. Overall, securing a contract with Accuro will see residents receiving significantly better services and value for money.

As well as these benefits, we have also



written other new elements into the contract, in order to respond to resident feedback:

- grass will now be cut as and when it is reaching an unacceptable length, rather than having a set number of cuts per year
- hedges and shrubs will be cut one extra time every year
- the cleaning team will receive the Real Living Wage (£9 per hour) for their work
- an annual programme of deep cleans has been added

Denise Rogers, a member of the Gateway Membership Team and one of the residents involved with the appointment, said: "We knew from the first moment we read the submission by Accuro that they ticked all the boxes. Their senior staff were very personable and want to encourage interaction with tenants. We would like our fellow residents to give them time and

space to get up and running with the new contract and to know that we will start monitoring them soon.

"Thanks to our input, you should see improved communication about the standards you can expect. We have found that being a resident inspector is quite easy, so if you'd like to become a resident inspector please get in touch!"

We are really pleased to have Accuro on board. As well as saving you money, Accuro will be employing cleaners who are trained in customer service, helping us with our satisfaction surveys and aiming to deliver a consistently excellent cleaning and grounds maintenance service.

Find out more about Accuro at www.accuro-environmental.co.uk/

If you have any questions about the contract tendering process, please get in touch on 0800 2182247 or email enquiries@wcht.org.uk.

Sharing our support for LGBT History Month



February was LGBT History Month, and to celebrate our staff proudly wrote and shared their personal messages of support.

Every year, the history of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights movement – and the people who helped shaped it – is celebrated in February. As part of our commitment to diversity and inclusion, we asked our staff to write down why they celebrate LGBT History Month, and proudly display it on social media and in the office.

Lots of our staff participated, from our executive directors to our temporary accommodation team and all across the organisation. The Gateway Membership Team also joined in, sharing their reasons for supporting the cause.

We've also been sharing a range of stories about LGBT icons on our social media, with helpful information about our services and services available locally for LGBT people. To find out more about how we can help, or support you in helping others, get in touch with our Community Engagement team on community@wcht.org.uk or on 01923 209183.

Helping new life blossom with baby boxes

We recently donated £800 from our Community Chest fund to Alternatives, a Watford-based charity for people facing challenges with their pregnancy.

Money from our Community Chest fund has been used to create and give out 'baby boxes' to expectant mothers in families with limited financial resources. As part of its services, the charity Alternatives can offer mothers in stressful or financially insecure situations a box filled with all the essentials for a newborn baby. Thanks to our funding, we were able to provide 10 baby boxes to help support challenging pregnancies and motherhood in Watford.

A baby box is a specially designed large box that becomes a baby's first bed. As well as a mattress, sheet and blanket for a baby, Alternatives fill the box with essential items like sleep suits, clothes, nappies, toiletries and soft toys which will all save a large amount of money in the first few months of a baby's life.

The boxes are offered to pregnant women who are claiming benefits, living in temporary accommodation, under 16, refugees or asylum seekers. Thanks to our donation, Alternatives were able to give out 10 of these boxes, saving mums-to-be some of the costs and stresses of having a newborn.

The feedback we received was incredibly positive, with one mother saying: "I am overwhelmed with gratitude. I had an emotional cry at the help and support that is provided for

people who find themselves in need. It took the worry out of buying the baby's bits, and knowing he had a place to sleep, clothes, nappies and blankets was a huge weight off my mind."

Another mum said: "I thought it was so lovely and had so much stuff inside – the box helped me with a handy little bed for my mum's house!"

To find out more about Alternatives Watford, visit their website at www.alternativeswatford.co.uk.



Repairs appointments to suit you!

Did you know that you can book evening and weekend repairs if daytime slots aren't convenient?

Most of our repairs are scheduled during work hours on weekdays. However, if making these appointments is not convenient, we can offer appointments on Thursday evenings and Saturday mornings.

We know that making an appointment during daytime isn't easy for everybody. If you find it can be really inconvenient to allow us access during the week, we do have some availability for appointments on Thursday evenings (4:30 – 6:30pm) and on Saturday mornings (8am – 12pm).

During these time slots, we will have one repairs operative available to carry out straightforward, non-specialist repairs. This means that you can book appointments for some jobs outside of normal working hours.



If you find it hard to arrange weekday appointments, the next time you book a repair you can request a Thursday evening or Saturday morning appointment, and we will try to accommodate you.

Book repairs by visiting www.wcht.org.uk or calling us on 0800 218 2247.

Funding fitness

We've helped to fund Watford Football Club Community Sports and Education Trust's health mentoring programme.

Active Watford & Three Rivers is a new health programme run by Watford Football Club's Sports and Education Trust. Alongside other organisations such as Watford Borough Council, the Premier League Charitable Fund and Herts Valley CCG, Watford Community Housing has donated £10,000 from its Community Development Fund to the new programme.

After a previous health programme, Active Herts, reported that participants had significantly improved their levels of activity after just three months, Watford Football Club CSE Trust decided to relaunch the idea at a more local level. With help from

our funding, people in Watford and Three Rivers can now sign up for help to lead more active lives!

Read more about the programme here: www.watfordfccsetrust.com/ActiveW3R



Have you planned ahead for Christmas expenses?

In the spring, Christmas can seem like a distant memory – but it often comes around again too soon! If you find that the festive period leaves you with financial worries, why not speak to Watford Credit Union about their Christmas Cracker saving plan?

A Christmas Cracker account allows you to save money throughout the year, which you can then only access between 20th November and 10th December (unless you give 60 days' notice). By putting money away which is entirely for use at Christmas, you can relax closer to the time knowing you have a fund set away from your usual finances.

The Credit Union can also provide you with lots of helpful tips, advice and information about saving money and loans.

You can visit their website here: www.watfordcreditunion.co.uk Alternatively, email them on info@watfordcreditunion.co.uk or call 01923 236401.

Let us insulate your loft!



If you're having a clean-out this spring, pop your head up into your loft and check to see if you've got insulation.

Loft insulation keeps your home warm, saves you money on your heating bills and helps the planet – and we're installing it for free! We can fit your loft with the insulation it needs to stay warm and energy-efficient.

If you discover you don't have insulation, we can come over and fit it for you. Get in touch and start saving money today! Call us on 01923 209141.

Check out our new website!

We have recently updated our website, with a brand new design and lots of new information so that you can find whatever you need quickly and easily. The new site is designed to work just as well on mobile devices as it does on desktop computers, so check it out now on your phone!

Visit the site at www.wcht.org.uk

Prince's Trust team gives hub a makeover

A Prince's Trust programme, run by Hertfordshire Fire and Rescue, has brightened up a nursery room at the Leavesden Green Community Hub.



As part of a 12-week personal development scheme, nine 16 to 25-year-olds spent a fortnight transforming a previously plain room into a bright, colourful, sensory space suitable for the nursery based at our Leavesden Green Community Hub.

The Prince's Trust Team programme gives young adults that are not in education or training the chance to gain skills, volunteer and boost their CV in order to improve their future prospects. A major part of the scheme is a two-week community project. After identifying local facilities that might require some creative improvements, Hertfordshire Fire and Rescue – who run the project for the Prince's Trust – approached us and offered to brighten up the room in the Leavesden Green hub, which is used by the Jack in the Box nursery.

Led by Paul Rhatigan, the nine participants raised £400 and used the money – along with additional materials donated by Jewson of Queens Avenue, Watford – to transform the nursery room by painting, sticking and stencilling the main archway and adding wall decorations. The project also included the nursery's outdoor space. The team built a playhouse and a sensory educational game board, and painted all of the garden's fences.

The nursery room is now brighter and more suitable for the children who visit the nursery. Julie Dare, Senior Hubs and Facilities



Officer for Watford Community Housing, said: "We're so pleased with the work done by the Prince's Trust Team programme. The room looks fantastic, and we know the nursery staff are thrilled with the designs and colours. We're really impressed with the thought and detail that has gone in to the changes, and can't wait to see the children enjoying their new space! Thank you to all the volunteers for their hard work, and to our partners at Hertfordshire Fire and Rescue and Jewson for their support."

Katy Bowen, Programme Manager for Hertfordshire Fire and Rescue, said: "It was delightful to witness the smile on everyone's face when they first walked in to the new nursery. The team worked so hard on this project, and they should be extremely proud of their achievements. It always amazes us to see a group of learners come together and become so passionate about the chosen project – they did a fantastic job in transforming the nursery. Thank you to all the staff at Leavesden Green Community Hub for making us feel so welcome."

A moving talk for residents from the National Autistic Society

To help raise awareness and encourage open discussion about autism, we invited Suzanne Clarke from the National Autistic Society to give a talk.

As part of our commitment to diversity and inclusion, Suzanne Clark, a volunteer from the Hertfordshire branch of the National Autistic Society, came to speak to our residents about her experience as an adult diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome.

Since her diagnosis, Suzanne has become a passionate advocate for awareness of the autism spectrum, speaking to audiences about how best to support, understand and recognise people with autism, whatever their age, behaviour or background.

The residents who attended the talk had all been affected by autism in some way. Some had the condition themselves, and others were there in support of their children or grandchildren. As Suzanne spoke, the audience opened up, discussing the issues raised and their individual experiences with autism. Although autism is a very personal topic, the openness and acceptance of others gave everyone the chance to talk freely and learn together.



Feedback about the event was incredibly positive. One attendee said: "I have found this talk insightful, and very useful to know how to support people who have autism. I now have a better understanding of what it is like to live with the condition."

We will be hosting another talk from the National Autistic Society on Tuesday 16th

April, from 1pm to 2pm, at the Holywell Community Centre.

If you would like to hear a talk on something you're affected by or a subject you want to learn more about, contact our Community Engagement team by calling 01923 209183.

Congratulations to our voucher winners!

To say 'thank you' to our customers for helping our services to run smoothly, we have several prize draws which offer the chance to win vouchers. Congratulations to the most recent winners!

Everyone who allows us access for our annual gas inspection on the first appointment is entered into a monthly prize draw. Our latest winner of a £25 Love2Shop voucher is Mr G (pictured).

Mrs P is also a winner! When you give us feedback on your satisfaction with our repairs service, we enter you into a prize draw to win £50 of Love2Shop vouchers. Well done to the winners!

To be in with a chance of winning your own vouchers just like these residents, keep an eye out for our repairs survey and make sure you let us in on your first gas safety appointment.



Become a member now to vote at this year's AGM!

Did you know that you can become a Watford Community Housing member and have your say on how we are run?

As Watford Community Housing is a Community Gateway organisation, all of our tenants, leaseholders and shared owners can choose to sign up to become a member with voting rights. This means you can vote at our Annual General Meeting (AGM), and influence our policies, services and key decisions.

Any proposed changes to the rules which govern how we operate are put forward at the AGM, which takes place in September every year. As a member you can either attend and vote in person, or you can register your votes by proxy.

We are now looking ahead to this year's AGM. If you aren't already a member and would like to vote this year, you need to apply to become a member by Friday 28th June.



To apply for membership or find out more, visit: www.wcht.org.uk/page/Membership/

Alternatively, call us on 0800 218 2247.

Would you like to receive your AGM paperwork by email?

We're always looking to spend money wisely, so that we can spend more on improving our services to you. Every year, we send our members all the paperwork they need ahead of our Annual General Meeting in September. The paperwork includes voting slips, details of any proposed changes to the rules about how we are run, and information about any new people who have put themselves forward to join our Board or Gateway Membership Team.

The paperwork for the AGM is one of our biggest mailings, which means that printing and postage costs can be quite high. To combat this, we're asking members to get

in touch with us if they would be happy to receive the AGM paperwork by email. You will then be able to read the information and reply by email too, or print it out if you prefer.

If you would be happy to receive your AGM paperwork in an email, then we can spend more on improving homes and communities!

Please get in touch!

Please let us know if we can send your paperwork by email this year – get in touch with our Assistant Company Secretary, Karen Airey. Call 01923 209061 or email karen.airey@wcht.org.uk.

Dates for your diary

Talking about autism
Holywell Community Centre,
WD18 9QD
Tuesday 16th April
13.00-14.00

IT, Word & Excel classes
Gateway House,
Clarendon Road
Starting 24th April
13.00-15.00

Paediatric first aid course
West Watford Free Church
Thursday 2nd May
10.00-12.00

Intergenerational music –
come and sing!
Horwood Court, WD24 7NG
The first four Fridays in May
13.45-14:45

Meet the contractor – drop
in to speak to Accuro, our
new grounds maintenance
and cleaning contractor
Gateway House,
Clarendon Road
Wednesday 14th May
17.30-20.00

Contact us

T: 0800 218 2247

E: enquiries@wcht.org.uk

www.wcht.org.uk