

Spring 2023

voice

Informative news and advice from Watford Community Housing

In this issue:

- What we're doing to support communities
- How we can help with money worries
- Have your say over what we do
- And more!



watford
community
housing

Do you need help managing your finances?

Increasing bills and the cost-of-living crisis have impacted our tenants in a number of different ways. If you are struggling with your finances then we are here to help.

People across the country are facing rising living costs and struggling with more expensive household bills, and we know that this affects many of our customers too.

At Watford Community Housing, we have a brilliant team of staff who want to support you in a way that suits you. Whether you're looking for practical support, advice on budgeting or more information about how to manage your bills, our Financial Inclusion Officers are there for you.

When you get in touch with us about your money worries, we will ask a Financial Inclusion Officer to make an appointment to discuss your situation with you in more detail. This conversation could be over the phone or in person, either at our offices or in your home.

We'll be honest and non-judgemental, and we treat everyone with respect.

The Financial Inclusion Officers can work with you to see if you're receiving the right benefits, provide you with Food Bank vouchers and refer you to other services if necessary.

If you could use some support, the first step is to get in touch. Talk to us - we want to help.

Further support

Looking for some easy-to-use online help? We have created a free calculator that will help you find out what benefits you may be entitled to, a budgeting tool to help you plan your personal finances, and a step-by-step guide through the



Universal Credit application process. Find these tools and other useful advice at www.wcht.org.uk/benefits

Supporting local residents with 'welcoming spaces' in Watford

This winter was very hard for lots of our tenants - many had to make tough decisions about whether they could afford to heat their home or put food on the table for their families.

In response to this, we partnered with Watford Borough Council to host a series of 'welcoming spaces' in our Luther Blissett and Leavesden Green Community Hubs. Across January and February, we held a range of activities including board game cafés, 'stay and play' sessions for the kids and coffee mornings.

We wanted to make sure every single person in our communities had a place to go to where they felt safe, could keep warm, save money on their heating and have a hot drink and natter with friends. No one was asked why they visited, and they could visit as many times as they wanted for as long as they wanted - everyone was welcome!

Many of our Independent Living schemes and hubs are still hosting 'welcoming spaces' on various weekdays.

To see the full list of places to visit in Watford, visit watford.gov.uk/welcomingspaces.

Hertfordshire County Council and its partners have also developed a network of 'Warm Spaces' - find your nearest location by visiting hertfordshire.gov.uk and searching for 'warm spaces'.



Are you interested in a career in housing?

We are funding housing qualifications for our tenants, giving people a chance to build a career.

Looking to build a career in housing? We're funding accredited qualifications through the Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH)!

Four tenants will get the chance to receive a CIH Level 2 Certificate in Housing Practice qualification. This is a great course that will enhance your involvement with, and understanding of, the housing sector.

It's a four-week online course and you'll get to choose one of these units, to learn more about the area that interests you most:

- Housing provision and housing organisations

- Customer service for housing
- Assets, repair and maintenance
- Professional development in housing

If you are interested, please email community@wcht.org.uk and explain why you would like to do this course.

We also provide a range of other funded training courses, including business administration, first aid, food hygiene, or becoming a customer complaints representative – and many more!

For more information about any of our training opportunities, please get in touch by emailing community@wcht.org.uk.



Want to earn while you learn?

We're always looking to the future, and offering apprenticeships ensures we have talented staff for years to come.

We're committed to creating great employment opportunities in our area and we offer a range of apprenticeship roles that are a great way to kickstart your career.

We run apprenticeships in many different departments, so there is sure to be something for everyone. With opportunities in everything from IT or administration to plumbing or customer services, our apprenticeships are a great way to earn while you learn.

Are you just leaving school and looking for an alternative to university? Or are you looking for a career change and want to retrain in a new field? Whatever your circumstances, our scheme is open to all ages!

Find out more on our website at www.wcht.org.uk/apprenticeship



GMT help us distribute funds

Our Gateway Membership Team – which represents tenants – plays a vital part in helping us to decide where and how our Community Development Fund is spent.



Over the past few years our Gateway Membership Team (GMT) has made such a valuable impact by helping us decide which projects to support through our Community Development Fund.

As part of our Customer Promise, between 2020 and 2025 we are investing £1 million into community projects that enhance the lives of our residents and build strong communities. The team review every bid we receive to ensure that the projects we fund are inclusive and meet the needs of our local community. Here are just some of the projects we fund that have been life-changing to many of our tenants:

Your Money Matters – This is our partnership with Citizens Advice Watford which gives our customers a fast-track to tailored, expert money advice. With high inflation and soaring energy prices, household bills are rapidly rising, so this project is vital in helping our customers to stabilise their finances, maximise their income and manage any debt.

Herts Mind Network – This amazing charity delivers essential mental health

support and provides a diverse range of services. Funded locally, the services are available to all residents in Hertfordshire over the age of 18 and they also offer dedicated services for people between the ages of 5 and 18. We funded one full-time staff member who supports residents with complex needs and provides community support.

One Vision – One Vision brings together people from different cultural backgrounds to address the needs of our community. They develop initiatives to tackle food poverty, mental health issues, social marginalisation and youth needs. We provided funding for two staff members.

RAISE – This charity is dedicated to supporting patients and believes that every patient deserves the highest-quality care possible, whether it's support through a pregnancy, care in an emergency, treatment for a long-term illness, or kindness in their final days. We provided funding to ensure that children and elderly people in Watford General Hospital received Christmas presents during their hospital stay.

Get involved

It's important that our tenants have the chance to shape our services and get involved with the local community. The GMT are keen to make sure everyone knows how to engage with us in the way that suits you best.

Whether you're really busy or have plenty of time to spare, and whatever skills you have, we have something for you. Here are just some of the ways you can get involved:

- Join our Green Panel – help us work towards our goal of Net Zero.
- Become a Customer Complaint Representative – review complaints to ensure we are handling them correctly.
- Become a Resident Inspector – score and give us feedback on cleaning and grounds maintenance in your area.
- Attend a scrutiny event – help us create an action plan for improving our services.

Check out the full list of options by visiting wcht.org.uk/getinvolved

Welfare Fund – As well as these amazing externally funded projects, in 2020 we set up a Welfare Fund to provide financial support to those worst affected by the coronavirus pandemic. This year, the GMT made the decision to increase the fund to £260,000 – which means we will have the capacity to support many more of our most vulnerable tenants who may be experiencing money worries due to the current cost-of-living crisis. This decision is going to make a huge difference to our tenants' lives.

Our community work

Improving our communities – beyond just the bricks and mortar – is a key part of our work. Here's a round-up of some of the things we've done recently.

Our community hubs

We manage a number of community hubs across Watford that offer a range of activities and can be hired out by local people and organisations. To make sure they are meeting the needs of our tenants and communities – now and in the future – we wanted to find out your opinion on our community hubs. As part of this, and we held eleven consultation sessions for you to visit the hubs, meet the team and ask any questions you have about our hubs. At the same time, we asked everyone to complete a survey to tell us what they think about our hubs, and what can be improved.

Here is some of the feedback we received:

"It is so important to have somewhere where there are intergenerational groups and facilities."

"All the staff and volunteers are amazing, understanding and kind."

"It's important to have a safe social space."

What our communities found to be most important was that we provide clean, easily accessible hubs that can be used for a variety of affordable activities.

Improving your neighbourhood

Each year we focus on a few of our community areas and work closely with residents to make sure we make real improvements. This year we are focusing on Holeywell, Garston and Rookery.

In February we sent out a survey to our residents living in those areas, asking how



they feel about their neighbourhood and what they would change about the area. We also held three focus groups for our residents to have an in-depth discussion about what improvements they would like to see. From this feedback we will then create a Neighbourhood Plan detailing how we will work towards improving the area. If you live in one of those three areas, make sure to look out for this!

How to cook on a budget

We, along with other local partners, recently held three cooking sessions at the Meriden Community Centre. The sessions were run by a qualified nutritionist from Beezee Bodies who taught everyone who attended to cook healthy and delicious slow-cooker recipes.

We are pleased to announce that we will be running the course again in April, so if you would like to join the class please email community@wcht.org.uk.



GMT umbrella group

The Gateway Membership Team is here to represent you.

By hearing your views, they ensure you are at the heart of what we do. To ensure that the voices of tenants are truly being heard, in 2022 they created the 'GMT Umbrella Group'.

The Umbrella Group, made up of constituted Tenant Resident Associations (TRAs) and Community Groups in Watford, was created as a way for the groups to come together to express their concerns, share knowledge and provide support to each other.

If you want to find out more about TRAs or would like to set one up your area, please contact community@wcht.org.uk – we will be happy to help and may also be able to provide funding to support you.

Remembering Mazie

We were saddened to hear of the passing of Mazie Gibson, a former Chair and Vice-Chair of our Gateway Membership Team.

Mazie held a number of high-profile roles, championing tenants' views and equality. She was Chair of our Independent Living Forum and she served on national tenants' panels, alongside her involvement with the Gateway Membership Team.



Know someone who's looking for a great affordable home?

Yeatman Court is a unique, modern development for shared ownership, affordable rent and social rent, in a timeless and historic art deco building in North Watford.

We're delighted to be offering great new homes at Yeatman Court, a unique, modern development of 145 affordable homes in North Watford.

This timeless and historic art deco building was originally established in 1918 as Yeatman's sweet factory, and more recently became the headquarters for Mothercare – so this building is at the heart of Watford's history.

We know that it can be difficult to access high-quality, affordable housing, so of the 145 homes at Yeatman Court, 70 are for shared ownership, 63 for affordable rent and 12 for social rent. These are all spacious, naturally lit one- or two-bedroom apartments.

Creating a sustainable environment was very important, and so we've ensured that there is access to multiple charging points for electric vehicles, a communal garden with space to grow fruit and vegetables and a car club to encourage ride-sharing.

Yeatman Court occupies a unique position just off a quiet residential road.

Commenting on our new development, Tina Barnard, our Chief Executive said:



“This building has been at the heart of Watford's history for over 100 years, so we're thrilled that these great new homes will be affordably priced to benefit the local community. Yeatman Court offers beautiful one-and two-bedroom apartments that are both affordable and ideally situated. It's a truly unique marriage of old and new, combining this stunning art deco façade with sustainable, modern amenities.”

We are experiencing very high demand for these homes, so if you, or someone you know, is interested in living here, register your interest now at wcht.org.uk/interest



It's time to get digital!

By signing up to your own Watford Community Housing account, your tenancy can be at your fingertips. Through our easy online portal, you can pay your rent, book a repairs appointment, message us and so much more. Go to our website and click 'Your account' to get started.

If you'd like to get our news sent straight to your inbox, why not sign up to our digital newsletter? Our monthly digital newsletter contains all the latest news about our services, what's happening in your neighbourhood, money-saving tips, events for you to get involved in and much more.

Sign up today by visiting www.wcht.org.uk/signup

Nifty (Over) Fifties win big!

We're really pleased to announce that the Nifty (Over) Fifty group that we support picked up a top award at the recent Hertfordshire Hero awards ceremony.

The 'Nifty (Over) Fifties' has taken home the 'Big Heart' trophy at this year's Hertfordshire Hero awards.

Nifty (Over) Fifties is a group aimed at people aged 50 and over, offering them a chance to socialise with like-minded people of a similar age. The group enjoys regular daytrips and activities, and has become an integral part of the local community.

We were thrilled to see them pick up the award – which is given for doing something truly amazing for the Hertfordshire community during the past 12 months – with the winner chosen from all nominees across every category of the awards. A massive achievement given the high level of competition!

Heather Newey, Chair of the group, said: "This award is such a welcome surprise

after a tough few years. I'm immensely proud of the group and thankful for the support that Watford Community Housing has given. One of the best things we've done is to move our coffee afternoon to the housing association's Independent Living scheme, Horwood Court, as this has been a lifeline for many members. It is lovely to be recognised for our work, and we really believe we're making a difference in the fight against loneliness that often comes with age. Here's to many more years of friendship and community."

The group meets monthly (during term time) at West Herts College, hosts coffee mornings, daytrips, and a Christmas lunch. If you're interested in joining please contact Nifty50GroupEnquiry@gmail.com and include your name, address and phone number.



Save the date - Thursday 15 June

For the last two years we have held our 'Big Door Knock' – which sees our staff take to the streets with the aim of visiting the homes of all our residents in one day – and we'll be doing it again in June!

It not only gives you a chance to meet our staff and hear from us but – more importantly – it is a great opportunity for us to learn what you think of our services and how we can go about improving them, as well as finding out how best we can support you.

Keep an eye on our website and social media channels for more information on the Big Door Knock!



Have your say on our estate services!

Our current contractors for cleaning and grounds maintenance, Accuro, will be coming to the end of their contract with us in 2024. We'd love to hear what you thought of the services they provided – and how we can make sure they continue to improve in the future.

We will be launching an online survey for you to have your say, so keep an eye on our website and social media channels to find out more!

Your feedback will help to determine whether Accuro are reappointed. And if the decision is taken to look for a new contractor, tenants will also have the opportunity to help us find the right company to deliver the excellent level of service that you – and we – expect.

This is a great opportunity to have your say over the services you pay for through your service charges. By sharing your views, you can help us find the right contractor at a cost-effective price for tenants.

The survey will be live in April – check www.wcht.org.uk for more information!



The latest news from the Gateway Membership Team - which represents you!

Make your voice heard at our AGM!

We're committed to putting tenants at the heart of our work. In fact, because we are a 'community gateway' housing association, **Watford Community Housing tenants have more power to influence what we do than most social housing residents across the country.**

As a community gateway housing association, we give our tenants and other local residents more of a say in decisions we make about homes and services. Under the community gateway model, you can become a full member if you are a tenant or leaseholder - alternatively you can be an associate member if you live in our local communities.

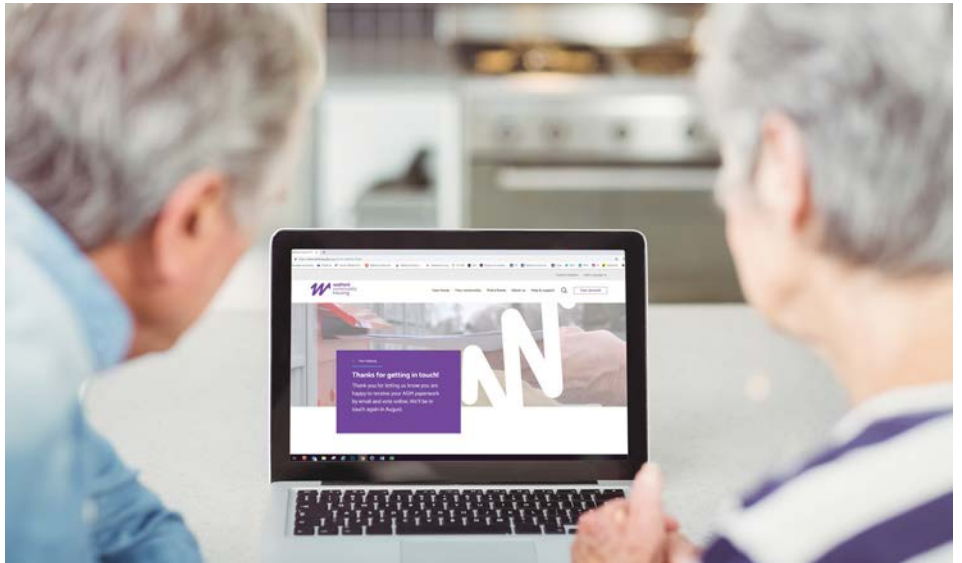
Members vote on key decisions at our annual general meeting (AGM) every September. As well as voting on whether to approve key aspects of the work we are doing, members vote on any changes to the rules that govern how we are run.

If you aren't currently a member, now is the time to sign up to make sure you are registered in time to vote at this year's AGM. Once you're a member, you can decide whether you want to join the AGM in person or just cast your votes ahead of the meeting.

To find out more and sign up now, visit www.wcht.org.uk/membership. Alternatively, call us on 0800 218 2247.

Already a member?

If you're already a Watford Community Housing member, we'll contact you ahead



of the AGM with all the information you need to cast your votes and take part in the AGM if you want to get involved.

If we have an email address for you, we'll send you a link to your information pack by email. To make sure you receive the pack, please make sure we have the correct email address for you. You can update your details through your online account, or contact us by phone or email.

If we don't have an email address for you, you'll receive your pack by post. However, we want to send as many packs as possible by email so that we can save on postage costs and waste - the less we spend on postage, the more we have to spend on improvements to tenants' homes and services.

Want to get more involved?

We are always looking for tenants who are passionate about helping their community to join our Gateway Membership Team. You will help shape our future, ensure that the most vulnerable people in your community get the support they need, and make sure that tenants' voices are heard.

As a member of the GMT, you would represent tenants by committing a few hours a month to helping us to improve our communities and services. Working with our Group Board and leadership team, you would offer valuable input into our decision-making as we work to deliver better homes and friendlier communities.

To find out more, get in touch or visit www.wcht.org.uk/join-the-gmt

How to make sure you can have your say at our annual general meeting

If you're already a member...

...make sure we have the right email address so you receive your AGM information pack.

You can update your details through your online account at www.wcht.org.uk, or let us know by calling us on 0800 218 2247 or emailing enquiries@wcht.org.uk

If you aren't a member yet...

...sign up now to become a member!

Visit www.wcht.org.uk/membership or call us on 0800 218 2247.

