

Autumn 2018

voice

Informative news and advice from Watford Community Housing

- How we're delivering better services for you
- Answering your questions on key issues
- What we're doing to improve homes
- Support for single parents
- Reporting on this year's AGM



watford
community
housing

Help to shape your future!



We are currently developing a new business plan, which will set out the key things that we aim to do between 2020 and 2025.

As part of this plan we want to develop our Tenant Offer, outlining what you can expect as a Watford Community Housing tenant.

We want to make sure that our main priorities reflect what's most important to tenants, so we recently ran a survey asking what matters most to you.

The survey results will help us to formulate the new business plan, keeping residents at the heart of our work.

If you didn't manage to complete the survey and would like to give us your feedback, we still want to hear from you. Email us at community@wcht.org.uk.

Helping teens to stay safe in relationships

We recently worked with Herts Young Homeless to support sessions for youngsters and parents offering guidance on developing healthy relationships.

Herts Young Homeless has reported a worrying trend of young people using its services as a result of unhealthy relationships. We recently worked with the charity to deliver advice and learning sessions on forming healthy relationships to parents and young people aged 11-16.

Both of the 'Your Voice, Your Choice' sessions focused on teaching young people how to identify different types of abuse, the signs and symptoms of abusive or coercive behaviour, and how to stay safe in a relationship.

As well as relationships, the sessions discussed 'sexting' and its implications, consequences and long-term impact.

The activities and conversations helped to ensure that these young people were able to talk confidently about healthy relationships, and gave them advice on dealing with real-life situations. All those who attended also received a certificate, free pizza and a £10 Amazon voucher!

Thanks to the sessions, the young people who attended are now able to identify an

unhealthy relationship and name at least one service that they can go to for help.

By educating families on how to spot the signs of abuse, and by advising teenagers on what they can do to protect themselves, we can help young people to stay safe.

For more information about Herts Young Homeless and its work preventing youth homelessness go to www.hyh.org.uk.



Half-price furniture at 9 Lives!

Watford Community Housing tenants can now get a 50% discount on a huge range of items from second-hand furniture shop 9 Lives!

Everything from storage units, mirrors, books, toys and soft furnishings is available for half the price if you take along proof of your tenancy (for example, a rent statement or your tenancy agreement).



Based in Rickmansworth, 9 Lives gives a second chance to pre-loved furniture, selling it at low prices to be able to provide people from all walks of life with furniture which helps make their house a home.

You can find 9 Lives at 25 Wharf Lane, Rickmansworth, WD3 1HA. You can also read more about them on their website: www.9livesfurniture.org.uk.

Celebrating 100 upgrades!

Our contractor Engie recently completed the 100th kitchen or bathroom refurbishment to be carried out through our improvement programme this year.

In order to celebrate the 100th job to be carried out under our improvement programme in 2018/19, staff from Engie and Watford Community Housing presented flowers, chocolates and a £50 gift voucher to lucky resident Sheila Harris.

Sheila's new kitchen, delivered by Engie as part of our five-year programme, is one of 100 kitchens or bathrooms that have been renewed so far this year.

Commenting on her new kitchen, Sheila said: "I'm very happy with it! It's a great improvement and I'm really happy with the quality too. I can't fault it at all – the turnaround time was very quick!"

"The Engie operatives were really professional and polite. They always showed identification so I knew who they were. They were very respectful and knocked on the door if they wanted to come into the room where I was to speak to me about anything. Engie were very, very good and I'm really happy with the new kitchen!"

We're really proud of the work Engie do in all of our homes, with tenants reporting very high satisfaction levels. We will continue to roll out our improvement works across our properties to install modern, fit-for-purpose kitchens and bathrooms.

Engie also work to improve our communities through their Social Value initiative. Currently, they are helping people get back to work by offering apprenticeships, placements and work experience opportunities.

Recently, they gave Sarah Rose from Watford the opportunity to spend time in a work environment for the first time in seven years when she applied for the work experience position. Also, Engie apprentice and Watford Community Housing resident Kelsey Fox was recently nominated for a nationwide apprentice award!

If you would like to find out more about Engie's apprenticeships or our improvement programme, visit our website at www.wcht.org.uk.



Sign of the times



The first phase of the installation of our new estate signage is now complete. Following the introduction of our new branding last year, we have begun updating our signs to reflect our new look and replace lots of old signs that were showing their age.

The first phase has seen new signs installed on every block in the Croxley View area as well as a number of other locations including Abbey View and Munden View, and the Harebreaks Community Hub.

The new signs are made from hard-wearing aluminium and have an anti-vandal coating, so they are made to stand the test of time.

We will soon be embarking on the second phase to upgrade the remaining signs, so keep your eyes peeled!



Share your views on housing

Have you noticed more about social housing in the news lately? Do you have strong views about the future of social housing and how the people providing it should run those homes?

The government is currently consulting on major changes to the social housing sector which will affect you! Following the tragic events at Grenfell Tower last year and several months of conversations with residents up and down the country, the government have published a housing 'green paper'.

A green paper is the first step towards legislation, seeking the views of interested groups and the general public on government policy.

This green paper covers a number of topics, including: solving the housing crisis (increasing the supply and quality of homes), removing the stigma many people feel about being a social housing tenant, making it easier for tenants to understand how their landlord is performing, and supporting tenants in making complaints when things go wrong. The paper sets out ideas for dealing with these issues and also invites further suggestions.

We welcome this opportunity to improve the relationship we have with our tenants and ensure government understands the issues clearly. We'll be sending a full response to the government's proposals. Watford Community Housing and the Gateway Membership Team want to hear your views to help us respond.

You can respond personally to the green paper here: www.gov.uk/government/consultations/a-new-deal-for-social-housing. Alternatively, you can email the Gateway Membership Team at gmt@wcht.org.uk or speak to our communities team on 01923 209183.

You said, we did!

It's really important to us that we listen and respond to the feedback you give us so we can provide better services. Here are some of the things we've done recently to improve our customer service for you.



New online accounts

We've created a new portal on our website that's dedicated to helping you manage your tenancy more quickly and easily online.

Your online account allows you to report repairs, check your rent account, report anti-social behaviour and change your tenancy details in a few easy clicks. Over 600 tenants are already using their online account and enjoying more modern and accessible services. We're going to be adding more features to the portal soon, so keep an eye out for updates!

Visit www.wcht.org.uk to sign up for an account now!

New ways of recording your feedback

We've changed our systems to improve the way we record your compliments, complaints and comments, allowing us to act on your feedback more effectively and make sure it leads to improvements to our services.

As well as these changes we've also acted on a query from the Gateway Membership Team, your tenant representatives, about how we respond to any problems raised about our service which aren't classed as formal complaints.

As we didn't have a formal process for these, we have come up with a whole new way of recording feedback to make sure we aren't missing opportunities to improve. These types of complaint, now known as 'grumbles', are issues which can be resolved at the first point of contact, but also require monitoring. Now, if you report a grumble, we log and monitor it to see how we can make our services better.

Giving you the chance to get involved

We want you to be able to help shape our services, whatever your lifestyle. With that in mind, we've created an 'Involvement Menu' so that if you want to get involved, you can find an option that suits you. With everything from volunteering your time by email to joining our Gateway Membership Team, we'll work with you to help you choose the option from the menu that suits you.

Visit www.wcht.org.uk and search for 'Involvement Menu' to find out more.



Getting to know you

In order to deliver services that best suit your needs, we've been asking you to provide key information about your background in our surveys and tenancy audits. By collecting this information, we can get to know our residents better – allowing us to tailor the events, communications and services we provide to give the best outcome for you and your area.

Finding out how we're performing

We've introduced more satisfaction surveys, so that we can ask you how we're doing in more aspects of the service we provide. For example, our post-call surveys help us to find out how well we're handling your calls, and surveys on our cleaning and grounds maintenance are helping us to determine how our contractors are performing.

We also now benchmark ourselves with a Net Promoter Score, which enables us to compare ourselves to other housing organisations and different types of businesses too.

Implementing our service standards

To let you know what you can expect from us, we sent every resident a copy of our service standards booklet. It tells you exactly what our services cover, so you can know when we're working well and hold us accountable if we fall below the standards we expect to meet. You can find a copy of the service standards booklet on our website.

Training staff to the highest standards

We know that one of the most important parts of your experience with us is the people you speak to. That's why we're always training our staff to improve their skills and to enhance their ability to provide the best service for you. Whether it's helping staff train for additional qualifications or sharing tips on the best practices, we're doing lots to ensure everyone is working well for you.

Improving our community impact

By asking our improvement programme partners, Engie, to commit to working with the community in our contract with them, we ensure that our residents benefit from more than just home improvements through the programme.

Engie have provided people in Watford with jobs, apprenticeships and training – as well as new kitchens and bathrooms! In the future, we'll be making sure that community engagement gets written into even more of our contracts.



Your Gateway Membership Team

The Gateway Membership Team (GMT) represents you and helps shape our services to make sure they meet tenants' expectations. This year, we have some new GMT members, and a new chair. That means fresh new ideas, wider representation and more impressive leadership.

What are we going to be doing next?

We're going to keep improving our services for you. Coming up, we're going to be launching a new, modern and user-friendly website and creating a 'customer journey' map, so we can improve the way your queries are dealt with.

Getting accredited by the ICS

We're working with the Institute of Customer Service to improve the service we deliver. This involves thoroughly demonstrating our level of customer service, professionalism and the improvements we're making in order to achieve a nationally recognised accreditation.

This is an opportunity to show that we're committed to upholding the high standards we set, and will allow us to compare our customer service with that of other organisations.

As part of the accreditation, we're running a survey to ask for your thoughts on our customer service. Your feedback will be used to make further improvements.

We want to keep hearing from you!

If you have any feedback for us, please get in touch on feedback@wcht.org.uk or by calling us on **0800 2182247**.

Guideposts – providing support for carers

Are you a carer for someone with a mental health condition or autism diagnosis? If so, the Guideposts Carers Group is here to help. The group, based in Henry Smith House in Watford, works primarily to support unpaid carers through a range of activities – from yoga, badminton and swimming, to arts and crafts, movie nights and social events – all geared towards helping people achieve better social interaction and mental wellbeing.

Guideposts' Carers Coordinator, Lin Fellows, said of the group: "Caring for someone with a mental health condition is very different from caring for someone who is physically ill and can impact on the carer's physical and emotional wellbeing. The stress and frustration can be overpowering. Therefore, to help our carers I want to set up groups where they can offload their stresses and be given helpful information to help them keep well."

If you would like to hear more, or want to attend one of the Guideposts sessions, you can contact Lin on **01923 223554** or lfellows@guideposts.org.uk.



Your questions answered

We hosted several events over the summer, giving tenants the chance to ask questions on the things that matter most to you.

July saw our latest Tenant Question Time event – organised by the Gateway Membership Team and this time focusing on Universal Credit. Our panel included Incomes and Tenancy Support Manager Mike McDonald, Tenancy Support Officer Cheryl Jago and Incomes Officer Rebecca Didcock from Watford Community Housing, along with Jane Walker, Head of Revenues and Benefits from Watford Borough Council.

On 3rd September we also held a ‘Heads of Service’ event, giving residents the opportunity to come along and pose questions to our three Heads of Service – Amy Willcox-Smith, Head of Customer Relationships, Paul Marsh, Head of Asset and Compliance, and Stuart Thompson, Head of Maintenance Services.

Both events were well attended, with a wide range of questions posed to our panel. You can read a small selection of them below.

Q. Is it true you have to access Universal Credit (UC) online only?

The panel confirmed that this has been the case from December 2017. As we all know, some people do not have easy access to the internet or are not comfortable using it. We have spoken with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and they have some resources to help people to complete the online form. Watford Community Housing’s Tenancy Support Officers can also help.

Q. I’ve always paid my Housing Benefit directly to my landlord and I want my Housing element of UC to continue to be paid directly to Watford Community Housing. How does that work when I am being switched over to UC?

Under UC, you will have a work coach who will have to make this decision depending on your individual circumstances. If someone is two months in arrears, the landlord can make a request for mandatory direct payment. Mike McDonald talked through the challenges of managing new payment cycles.



Rebecca Didcock added that if direct payment is approved, it is deducted from the amount paid to the claimant, but is not physically paid to the landlord until an extra month later. This means that if an Alternative Payment Arrangement (APA) is granted at the start of a claim, this places the person into two months of rent arrears as soon as they start with UC direct payments.

Q. How are these arrears tackled?

Mike explained that we work with tenants individually to provide support. The DWP approach is to take between up to 20% of the living element payments to cover arrears, but we feel it needs to be tailored around the person. Rent officers meet with tenants to agree affordable payments, based on an Income and Expenditure form.

Q. I moved in 18 years ago and my rent has risen by £60 per week since then. Once I stop working, I’m concerned about being able to afford my rent taking into consideration other outgoings.

The panel explained that for the last three years rents have been reduced. The rents come from a government-set formula and social rents are typically 40% of the value of market rent properties. This means that social tenancies are priced between 40-60% less than an equivalent property on the private rental market. It was explained that Watford Community Housing has two Tenancy Support Officers who would

be able to visit you in your home and support tenants who may be worried about making ends meet.

Q. Last year, lots of people’s boilers broke down at the same time. Are we better prepared this year?

Paul explained that it was an exceptional year and the extreme temperatures created a huge problem across the country. The wind chill factor froze the condensate pipes and this was not an ordinary set of circumstances. Services countrywide were affected and organisations like British Gas stopped visiting properties and even stopped answering calls. Our operatives repeatedly worked late to ensure that disruption to tenants was minimised and, given the circumstances, provided an exceptional service. We have learnt a number of lessons from this and we will increase information on our website and social media for this winter. We have also tightened up some of our emergency staff procedures.

Q. Do we think Watford Community Housing is prioritising the development of new homes over the maintenance of existing stock?

Paul explained that building new properties does not interfere with the budget for planned works. Ben added that our stock is decreasing year on year due to ‘Right To Buy’ and there is a UK-wide housing crisis. Our Board strongly feels that we need to be playing our part in creating new properties.

People in attendance were pleased to see the government’s new Housing Green Paper showing a positive approach to building more social housing. Homes England, which provides funding for building work, has just begun to offer a pot of funding to enable social housing programmes to be delivered and we are currently bidding for this.

To see the full reports for either event, visit www.wcht.org.uk and search for ‘TQT UC’ or ‘Heads Q&A’.

New recruits for GMT!

Your Gateway Membership Team is pleased to announce the addition of some new members.

Lucie Summers and Simanga Billiat were selected from a number of applicants to join the Gateway Membership Team – the body that represents all of our tenants and acts as your voice to Watford Community Housing.

GMT Chair Chris Blackett said: “There were a number of very good candidates who applied to join, but we felt that Lucie and Simanga were the right choices to complement the existing GMT and help us to achieve our goals on behalf of all Watford Community Housing’s tenants. Their commitment and passion for making a difference is exactly what we need. We want to welcome them on board and look forward to working alongside them.”

If you would like to contact the GMT to discuss any issues you may have, or want to learn more about the work they do, you can email GMT@wcht.org.uk.



Lucie (left) is already getting involved in the GMT's work.



Single Parents Watford group established

The first meeting of the new Single Parents Watford group took place in September and was a big success.

Everyone who attended was really positive about the group and spent the session getting to know each other and discussing ideas for future outings with their children, including a Christmas party and a half-term event, which we will be funding through our Community Engagement team.

Lorraine Ford, Development Officer for Watford Community Housing and herself a single parent, spearheaded the formation of the new group. She said: “The main reason for starting the group was to give single parents the opportunity to meet others in the same boat, who know what it’s like to be a single parent and the difficulties that can come with it. We can really help to support each other.”

This was echoed by the other parents who came along, all of whom took leaflets and were keen to spread the word in the community.

If you are a single parent and would like to find out more, such as details of meetings or upcoming trips, or want to get involved with the group you can find them on Facebook by searching for ‘Single Parents Watford’ – or you can contact our Community Engagement Team on **01923 209183** or community@wcht.org.uk.

Your services online

Have you signed up for our new digital tenancy services yet?

We’ve improved our website so that you can manage your tenancy with Watford Community Housing more easily. You can now sign up for your new account, which allows you to see live rent account data and access lots of other new features which are designed to make life easier for you. In order to access your upgraded online account, complete with new features, sign up on our website at www.wcht.org.uk now.



A successful AGM!



There was a good turnout of more than 50 people for our 11th Annual General Meeting in September, which was held at Beechen Grove Baptist Church on Clarendon Road.

Tenants who are also Watford Community Housing members had the opportunity to vote on proposed changes to the rules which govern how we operate, giving them a say over our future.

In the run-up to the AGM, Watford Community Housing worked closely with the Gateway Membership Team – which represents tenants – to agree the changes that were put forward, and they were approved by members on the night. They

are designed to ensure that our rules are fit for the future and will help us to deliver better services for tenants, while retaining our unique characteristics as a Community Gateway.

Ahead of the AGM, we also published our annual report to residents, which rounds up our activities and how we performed during 2017/18. You can read the report now on our dedicated website at www.ourannualreport.co.uk.

All Watford Community Housing tenants are eligible to become members, so if you want to vote at next year's AGM and aren't currently a member please call us on **0800 2182247** or email enquiries@wcht.org.uk.

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Dates for your diary

Leavesden Community Group
Meet your local PCSO
Leavesden Green Community Hub
Monday 15th October

Tenant Question Time –
'Understanding your tenancy'
Gateway House, Clarendon Road
Wednesday 7th November

Safety Awareness Day
Harebreaks Community Hub
Tuesday 20th November

Contact us

T: 0800 218 2247

E: communications@wcht.org.uk

www.wcht.org.uk



Update on our scrutiny review

Your Gateway Membership Team has just begun reviewing our lettings process. They will be looking at the way we communicate with our tenants, from the point we make an initial offer through to when the new tenants have their six week follow-up visit.

GMT Vice-Chair, Katina Mailley, who is leading on this project, shared her thoughts on what she hopes to achieve from this review: "We want to see how well we communicate with our tenants. For us it's important to understand the entire process of becoming a tenant, from start to finish, in order to find out what potential problems there are and how we can go about fixing them. We want to make sure people have all the information they need before, during and after moving into their new homes, in order to make the whole thing as easy as possible. Once we have completed our review we will be making our recommendations for improvements that could be made."

The review is expected to continue until the end of the year, but if you would like to find out more or want to know how you might be able to get involved, get in touch with our Community Engagement Team on **01923 209183** or community@wcht.org.uk.

