



**ASHFORD**  
BOROUGH COUNCIL

# **Housing Services**

## **Tenants' Handbook**



## **Contents**

|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| <b>Our mission statement</b>  | <b>5</b>  |
| <b>Introduction to Ashford Borough Tenants' Forum</b>                   | <b>6</b>  |
| <b>Moving into your new home</b>  | <b>7</b>  |
| Viewing the property with your area manager or sheltered scheme manager | 7         |
| Things you must do before you move into your new home                   | 7         |
| Things you must do after you move into your new home                    | 8         |
| How are you settling into your new home?                                | 8         |
| <b>Managing your tenancy</b>  | <b>9</b>  |
| Your tenancy agreement explained  | 9         |
| Your rights and responsibilities as a tenant                            | 10        |
| Help with managing your tenancy   | 10        |
| Succession  | 10        |
| Rent and service charges  | 10        |
| Paying your rent and service charges                                    | 11        |
| Claiming housing benefit  | 11        |
| What can you do if you have difficulties paying your rent?              | 12        |
| Rent and service charge arrears   | 12        |
| <b>Repairs and maintenance to your home</b>                             | <b>13</b> |
| Who is responsible for repairs to your home?                            | 13        |
| How do I report a repair?   | 13        |
| How soon will my repair be completed?                                   | 13        |
| Other repairs   | 13        |
| Out of hours repairs  | 14        |
| Your confirmation and feedback  | 14        |
| Annual gas safety checks  | 14        |
| Improving your home   | 15        |
| Fire safety   | 15        |
| Electrical safety   | 16        |
| How to prevent condensation and mould growth                            | 17        |
| Asbestos  | 17        |
| Planned maintenance to your home  | 17        |

|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| <b>Tenant participation</b>                               | <b>18</b> |
| What is tenant participation?                             | 18        |
| Ashford Back Chat   | 18        |
| Ashford Borough Tenants' Forum                            | 18        |
| Block Agreements  | 18        |
| Community Forums  | 18        |
| Consultation and monitoring                               | 18        |
| Estate walkabouts   | 19        |
| Focus groups  | 19        |
| Housing News  | 19        |
| Local community groups                                    | 19        |
| Mystery shopping  | 19        |
| Parish Councils   | 19        |
| Repairs Monitoring Group                                  | 20        |
| Seniors' Forum  | 20        |
| South East Kent Tenant Participation Forum                | 20        |
| Surgeries   | 20        |
| <br>  |           |
| <b>Living in your community</b>                           | <b>21</b> |
| What is being a good neighbour?                           | 21        |
| Making an initial complaint about a problem               | 21        |
| Incident logs   | 21        |
| Mediation   | 21        |
| Noise nuisance  | 22        |
| Harassment - disability, gender reassignment, race or sex | 22        |
| Domestic abuse  | 23        |
| Working with our partners                                 | 23        |
| What can be done if the problem persists?                 | 23        |
| <br>  |           |
| <b>Moving home</b>  | <b>24</b> |
| Housing Options   | 24        |
| Transfers   | 24        |
| Assisted Move Scheme                                      | 25        |
| Older persons and sheltered accommodation                 | 25        |
| How can I apply for a move?                               | 25        |
| Mutual exchange   | 26        |
| Right to buy  | 26        |
| How do I end my tenancy?                                  | 27        |
| Leaving your home   | 27        |

## Alternative formats

This handbook can be translated into other languages or provided in different formats if required. If you need this information in a different format call 01233 331111.

如果您需要本資訊的其他語言版本，請致電01233 331111。

"نہمگر ہم زانیاریات بہ زمانیکی دیکہ دعوت،  
تکایہ پیوندی بہ ژمارہ 01233331111 بکہ"

"यदि तपाईंलाई यो जानकारी अन्य भाषामा चाहिएमा,  
कृपया 01233331111 मा फोन गर्नुहोला"

شمیری ته زنگ ووهی. که دا معلومات په کوم بلی ژبی کی غواری، 01233331111

Jeśli niniejsza informacja potrzebna jest w innym  
języku, prosimy o kontakt pod numerem 01233 331111

اگر آپ کو یہ معلومات کسی دوسری زبان میں  
برکال کریں مطلوب ہے تو، براہ کرم 01233331111

## How can you contact us?

☎ 01233 330688

@ housing@ashford.gov.uk

✉ Housing Services, Ashford Borough Council, Civic Centre, Ashford, Kent, TN23 1PL  
In an emergency outside normal office hours telephone 01233 629911.

## How to report a repair

☎ 01233 330366

🌐 www.ashford.gov.uk/houserepairs

## How to get housing advice

Visit Ashford or Tenterden Gateways where, in addition to housing advice, they offer a wide range of public and voluntary services under one roof.

🌐 www.ashfordgateway.co.uk.

☎ 08458 247 202. Text Phone/Minicom 08458 247 905

@ info@ashfordgateway.co.uk

📠 01233 638012

## Identification

Do not allow anyone into your home without correct identification. All employees of Ashford Borough Council and their contractors will carry identification, which will include a photograph. Contractors should be wearing company-identifiable uniform and all vehicles should bear the company's name. If you are in any doubt please contact Housing Services on 01233 330688 who should be able to confirm if the caller is genuine.

## **Our mission statement**

***‘Dedicated to providing decent sustainable homes and communities for all our tenants.’***

Ashford Borough Council provides quality homes and services for people living in Ashford where there is a high demand and insufficient supply. Managing over 4700 homes and employing more than 80 staff, we are working to the principle that we are ‘more than a landlord’ and our tenants are firmly at the heart of everything we do.

Your tenant’s handbook has been designed with the help of residents to give you useful information about your tenancy and the services we offer.

From time to time we may update or add information to the handbook; these updates will be available on-line or sent to you if requested. We want you to enjoy living in your home and neighbourhood. As a tenant you have certain rights but you also have certain responsibilities to us as your landlord.

Your handbook contains a range of information so that you can quickly and easily look up what you need to know. For example, it tells you how to report a repair or how to get involved in helping make some of the decisions on how things are organised and run. If you need advice on paying your rent or want to know more about gas safety in the home, this handbook will also help.

The Housing Management team will help you manage your tenancy, answer your rent enquiries, give advice on money matters and carry out estate inspections to check neighbourhoods are well maintained.

## **Introduction to Ashford Borough Tenants' Forum**

Ashford Borough Tenants' Forum would like to welcome you to your new home.

The forum is a group of tenants and leaseholders who meet monthly, with staff and councillors, to debate and decide on issues affecting the housing service.

If you are a tenant, leaseholder or family member living with a tenant or leaseholder you can put yourself forward for election to the forum. Forum members serve for three years. If you would like more information contact the housing services team on 01233 330688.

The forum is pleased to be involved with Ashford Borough Council officers in the publication of this handbook.



## Moving into your new home

### Viewing the property with your area manager or sheltered scheme manager

Once the viewing is completed, you will be advised when your tenancy will start (always a Monday) and when and where you can collect your keys. To collect your keys you must bring either two weeks rent or a completed housing benefit form if you are claiming Job Seeker's Allowance/Income Support or Employment Support Allowance together with identification. Proof of your entitlement will also be required. Without these you will not be able to collect your keys.

If you are a tenant from another Ashford Borough Council property or temporary accommodation provided by the council, you will need to return your keys for this property by noon on the day your new tenancy starts. If you fail to do so, you will be charged each week until the keys are returned.

If you are transferring from a housing association please contact them directly regarding the notice period you are required to give.

If you need help with furnishing your home you may qualify for a Community Care Grant. For more information call **Job Centre Plus on 0845 604 3719**. Alternatively you may find what you need at the Gateway Furniture Project.

**Visit [www.gatewayfurniture.org](http://www.gatewayfurniture.org) or call 01233 638878.**

If you are on a low income you can see if you are entitled to help by using the online Housing and Council Tax Calculator at **[www.ashford.gov.uk/benefitcalculator](http://www.ashford.gov.uk/benefitcalculator)**.

Alternatively you can ask Housing Services to carry out an approximate calculation at your viewing.

### Things you must do before you move into your new home

We want your move into your new home to be as successful as possible. There are a few things you must do before you start to live in your new home.

- **Call Swale Heating on 0800 731 1886** to arrange a turn on and test of your gas boiler. This is a Health and Safety requirement and your boiler is not safe to use until this test has been completed.
- **Call MPAS on 0845 601 5467** to find out which company is currently supplying your electricity
- **Call Gas Supplier on 0870 608 1524** to find out who supplies your gas

You may need to order a new payment card or key if you have pre-pay meters. This is very important as the existing key or card may have debt on it.

## **Things you must do after moving into your new home**

Once you have moved into your new home you must do the following things:

- Contact the council's Finance department and set up your new council tax account unless you have applied for housing and council tax benefit
- Contact the relevant water companies to set up your payment accounts for water supply and sewerage
- Apply for a TV licence or to have an existing licence transferred to your new home
- Arrange for your post to be forwarded from your previous address
- Arrange contents insurance to cover any damage or theft at your home

If you have agreed to speak to a member of the Ashford Borough Tenants' Forum about your experience of moving into your new home, we hope you will respond to their brief questionnaire when they telephone you.

## **How are you settling into your new home?**

Once you have settled into your new home, we will visit you at a mutually agreed date and time four to six weeks after the start of your tenancy.

We will discuss how you have found your first few weeks living in your home and give you the opportunity to report any outstanding repairs or problems you may be experiencing. We are able to offer you advice and support on a wide range of issues.

You will be asked to complete an Ashford Back Chat feedback form so that we can contact you in the future to ask you what you think about the service we are providing. More details about this are available in the Tenant Participation section of this handbook.

## Managing your tenancy

### Your tenancy agreement explained

Your tenancy agreement is a legal contract between you and Ashford Borough Council, signed by both parties. Your tenancy agreement highlights your responsibilities to the council and our responsibilities to you. Please contact us if you would like to discuss your tenancy agreement in more detail.

### Ashford Borough Council currently offers three types of tenancy:

#### Introductory Tenancy

An introductory tenancy is given to all new tenants who apply as home seekers or any tenant who has been placed in temporary accommodation which has been deemed suitable. An introductory tenancy is granted for a trial period of 12 months. If you do not break any of the tenancy conditions during this time you will automatically become a 'secure tenant' on the anniversary of your tenancy.

If you breach your tenancy we can extend your trial period for a further six months.

During your introductory tenancy you do not have the same rights as a Secure Tenant. This means you cannot:

- Apply for the right to buy your home (but it will count towards your qualifying period)
- Apply for a mutual exchange (swap your home)
- Vote for a change to a new landlord

#### Secure Tenancy

A secure tenancy is a safe and valuable type of tenancy where the rights of secure tenants are set down in law and which gives you more rights than an introductory tenant such as:

- Exchanging your property with another council tenant, registered housing association or a council tenant from another council.
- The right to buy your home
- The right to take in a lodger (however you must notify the council beforehand)
- The right to sub-let part of your home with written consent

The council can only end your tenancy by obtaining an order for possession from the county court.

#### Non-secure tenancy

A non-secure tenancy is offered to applicants who have made a homelessness application and have been placed in temporary accommodation as described in Part VII of the Housing Act 1988.

## **Your rights and responsibilities as a tenant**

You can find information about your legal rights as a council tenant at [www.ashford.gov.uk/tenantsrights](http://www.ashford.gov.uk/tenantsrights)

Alternatively, you can get free independent advice from the Citizens Advice Bureau or Shelter.

## **Help with managing your tenancy**

If you have difficulty managing your tenancy we can help you by offering advice and making appropriate referrals to other agencies or organisations such as floating support which can offer free one-to-one support for vulnerable tenants for up to a year. If you are assigned a housing support worker, they can help with a variety of matters including money management, life skills and debt advice.

## **Succession**

A person can succeed to a tenancy (but not always the actual property) upon the death of the original tenant if they occupy the property as their only and principal home at the time of the tenant's death \*and either:

- The tenant's spouse, partner or joint tenant or another member of the tenant's family and have resided at the property throughout the period of 12 months prior to the tenant's death
- The spouse, partner or joint tenant is living at the home at the time
- The property was also their main and only home at the time and for at least 12 months prior to the death
- \*No previous succession has taken place

## **Rent and service charges**

The rent you pay provides the income for the Housing Services department. This enables us to manage your home and carry out repairs and improvements. Our rent is set by central government and is reviewed annually with any changes coming into effect in April of each year.

Your rent may also include service charges for additional services we provide to you; some of these charges are eligible for housing benefit while others are not.

We charge for the following services:

- **Cleaning:** if you live in a block of flats which has a communal area this will be cleaned by our cleaning contractors. The size and number of flats the communal area(s) serve will determine how often these are cleaned and the associated weekly charge

- **Cess pool:** if you live in a rural area your property may not be on the main drainage system so your property will be linked to a cess pool. There is a weekly charge for the clearance and up-keep of this pool\*
- **Water:** if you live in sheltered accommodation we may manage the utility bills for your water. If we do, we will charge you a standard weekly amount to cover the charges\*
- **Heating:** if you live in sheltered accommodation a charge for heating your property is included in your weekly rent\*

\*These charges are not eligible for housing benefit.

### **Paying your rent and service charges**

You will be charged for 50 rent weeks throughout the year, with two rent-free weeks in December. Your rent is due weekly, however you can make an agreement to pay fortnightly, four weekly or per calendar month.

We will send you two statements per year, but you can request an additional statement by calling **01233 330688**.

You can pay your rent in a number of ways:

- By direct debit or standing order
- By using your rent card at your local Post Office, PayPoint outlet, Tenterden or Ashford Gateways or the Civic Centre
- Over the telephone
- Via the internet
- You can also pay by credit card, but this is not recommended as a charge is made for paying by this method

### **Claiming housing benefit**

If you are eligible to receive housing or council tax benefit, it is your responsibility to make a claim.

You can pick up a form at the Ashford and Tenterden Gateways or Civic Centre or telephone us and request a form be posted to you.

If you accrue rent arrears because you have not provided the correct information, you will be responsible for paying these arrears.

You can get advice about benefits from the Welfare Advice Service.

Visit [www.welfareadvice.co.uk](http://www.welfareadvice.co.uk)

or call **0845 3450310 (between 1 - 5pm, Monday - Friday)**.

## **What can you do if you have difficulties paying your rent?**

If you have problems paying your rent the most important thing to do is contact us. We will be able to discuss the problems you are experiencing and offer practical help and advice.

If you are struggling with managing your money and/or debts, you can visit Debt Advice sessions at Ashford Gateway Plus, Ashford on Monday, Wednesday and Friday between 9.30am and 12.30pm for free impartial advice.

Alternatively you could contact:

Citizens Advice Bureau on **01233 626185**

Shelter on **0844 5151444**

Consumer Credit Counselling Service on **0800 138 1111**

Visit the Ashford or Tenterden Gateway or visit **[www.ashford.gov.uk/housingplus](http://www.ashford.gov.uk/housingplus)**

## **Rent and service charge arrears**

If you are experiencing difficulties paying your rent and service charges we can offer support and advice. Further problems can be prevented providing you talk to us about your difficulties.

If your rent account gets into arrears we may decide to take recovery action including court action, which may lead to you being evicted from your home.

We will work with you to resolve your rent arrears. However, if arrears continue to rise a notice will be served advising of our intentions to proceed with court action to recover the debt and your property. All notices give you 28 days to contact us to discuss how the arrears can be resolved; if an agreement is not reached we may proceed with court action.

The best way to avoid this is to keep in contact with us and not to ignore the problem.



## Repairs and maintenance to your home

### Who is responsible for the repairs to your home?

You are responsible for keeping the inside of your home and your garden including boundary walls, fences and gates in good condition. You will also be responsible for some repairs.

We will carry out repairs for which we are responsible and rely on you to report any faults promptly and as fully and accurately as you can.

Please make sure you are at home to let the contractor in at the agreed time. We prioritise our repair requests so that we can address those that are urgent first.

### How do I report a repair?

You can report your repair in a number of ways:

-  [www.ashford.gov.uk/houserepairs](http://www.ashford.gov.uk/houserepairs)
-  [housing@ashford.gov.uk](mailto:housing@ashford.gov.uk)
-  01233 330366
-  Ashford or Tenterden Gateway  
Civic Centre  
Local housing surgery (details can be found in  
Housing News, our tenants' magazine)
-  Housing Repairs Team, Housing Services,  
Ashford Borough Council, Civic Centre,  
Tannery Lane, Ashford, TN23 1PL



### How soon will my repair be completed?

- Emergency repairs will be carried out within four hours
- Urgent repairs within three days
- Routine repairs within 28 days

### Other repairs

Some repairs are not our responsibility and should be reported as follows:

- **Gas leaks:** contact National Gas Emergency Service
- **Gas meters:** contact your supplier
- **Mains water supply problem:** contact your supplier

## **Out of hours repairs**

Ashford Borough Council offers an out of working hours service. This should only be used for emergency repairs.

An emergency is defined as something which could not have been foreseen and which could cause danger to health, tenants' safety, or serious damage or destruction to property. Emergency call out contractors will usually make the situation safe to enable full and proper repairs to be undertaken during normal working hours. The types of work they attend include:

- Severe roof leaks
- Burst pipes
- Blocked drains
- Blockage of your only toilet
- Loss of electrical power or light
- Loss of gas
- Loss of heating in cold weather where there is no other form of heating available
- Loss of immersion heater if this is the only source for hot water

If a contractor is called out when an emergency repair is not justified then you are liable to be charged for all costs concerned.

Out of hours emergency number: **01233 629911**

## **Your confirmation and feedback**

Once you have reported your repair, you will be sent a confirmation letter in the post. This letter also gives you the opportunity to give us your feedback. This will help us to monitor the level of service you are being offered and address any concerns that you raise.

## **Annual gas safety checks**

Your safety is of paramount importance to us. Our heating contractor carries out annual gas checks of all the boilers in our homes. This helps ensure the safety of you, your family and your neighbours. We are legally required to carry out this gas safety check.

If you fail to provide access to your property after two attempts including broken appointments, we may go to court to obtain an injunction to enter your home so that we can carry out the check. You will also incur any court costs. This will be a minimum of £200.

**Please remember that these checks are for your safety.**

## **Improving your home**

If you wish to make an improvement to your home, such as installing patio doors or structural changes, you must write to us submitting detailed plans of what you want to do and how you will be carrying out the improvement. We will then reply to confirm whether permission has been granted for the work to be carried out, and specify any conditions which might apply.

## **Fire safety**

**Most household fires occur in kitchens, bedrooms and living rooms and the majority of kitchen fires involve over-heated oil or frying pans.**

### **How to deal with a pan fire**

- Turn off the heat
- Place a damp cloth over the pan
- Leave to cool down
- **Never** use water
- Never leave pots and pans unattended for too long

### **A substantial number of fires are due to electrical faults**

- Always use the correct fuse or fuse wire
- Do not overload electrical sockets
- Do not use damaged appliances or equipment with damaged cables

### **General fire safety tips**

- Do not smoke in bed (most bedroom fires are caused this way)
- Always ensure cigarettes are extinguished properly
- Where possible always use fire resistant furniture
- Use fire guards with open fires
- Do not leave children unattended near open fires

### **Most deaths caused by fire are due to smoke inhalation**

- Ensure smoke detectors are fitted and work
- Check the batteries and test the detector regularly
- Never cover up smoke detectors because they are a nuisance
- To avoid false alarms, regularly clean smoke detectors with a vacuum cleaner
- If your smoke alarm is too sensitive consider changing to an “Optical” detector

## **Know what to do in the event of a fire**

- Prepare an evacuation plan. Ensure everybody in the household, especially the vulnerable (young/elderly), are familiar with the plan
- Practice your evacuation plan
- If possible provide fire extinguishers/blankets in sensible locations and know how to use them and what types of fire they can be used on
- If you have a mobile phone keep it charged and close to you at all times

You can also contact Kent Fire and Rescue Service who may be able to visit your home to give you advice on fire safety and install a free smoke alarm for you.

## **Communal areas and fire exits**

How quickly you can evacuate a building can mean the difference between life and death.

Fire exit routes must be kept free from obstructions so that escape in the event of a fire is not hindered or delayed. Bear in mind the potential poor visibility due to smoke and the panic that might set in. What may appear okay in the calm of day might be very different when it counts.

Flat doors must have self closing devices fitted and must be kept closed to contain any fire that may start and to stop smoke getting into your home from elsewhere.

**Flammable goods must never be kept in common areas as these are a severe risk for safe escape and a temptation to arsonists.**

**Do not store any items or rubbish in the communal areas. We reserve the right to remove any items stored this way and will not be liable for loss.**

## **Electrical safety**

Ashford Borough Council will carry out an electrical safety check at your home at least every ten years. It is important that you co-operate with access to carry out this check.

Most electrical works must be carried out by a qualified electrician. If you are in doubt, please ask.

To reduce the risk of shock or fire from electrics please follow the following guidelines:

- Remember it is illegal for anyone who is not qualified and registered to undertake installations in a kitchen or bathroom or outside the property
- Make sure plugs are wired correctly and the correct fuses are used and be aware there have been colour changes to cables that may confuse and endanger the unaware
- Test circuit breakers regularly and report any problems

- Switch off electrical items not in use
- Do not overload sockets
- Do not run cables under carpets
- Use circuit breaker protected outlets for equipment used outdoors
- Use and maintain appliances in accordance with manufacturers' instructions

### **Help to prevent condensation and mould growth**

Condensation often happens when moist warm air meets a cold surface such as a window. Condensation is more likely to happen when there is more moisture than normal in the air. How you ventilate and heat your home affects the level of condensation.

You can take steps to reduce and prevent condensation by producing less moisture, increasing your ventilation and keeping your home a little warmer. Some of these are listed below:

- Do not block vents
- Allow space for air to circulate
- Keep a small window or vent open where there is moisture in a room
- Increase ventilation when cooking
- Cover pots and pans with lids
- Use extractor fans where fitted
- Close doors so that moist air does not spread throughout your home
- Do not dry washing on the radiators

### **When should you contact us?**

You should contact us if mould is persistent after you have removed it and you have carried out all of the preventative measures listed above. You should also contact us if your council-installed extractor is faulty.

### **Asbestos**

Asbestos is safe as long as it remains undamaged. We have procedures for managing any asbestos which may be within our homes. Please contact the Housing Services team for further information on **01233 330688**.

### **Planned maintenance to your home**

Ashford Borough Council has a programme of major improvements to our homes such as renewal of boilers and kitchen and bathroom refurbishments. You will be contacted well in advance of any work being carried out to your home and for the majority of work that is carried out you will be sent an information leaflet explaining what the work involves.

Please contact our Planned Maintenance team on **01233 330329** should you require any further information.

## **Tenant participation**

### **What is tenant participation?**

You have the right to have a say about the way your homes and communities are managed; tenant participation helps to achieve this.

Housing Services welcome and value resident involvement and provide a range of ways for you to have a say about the management of your homes and communities.

These range from responding to occasional questionnaires about whether a repair has been carried out to the required standard, to becoming an elected tenant representative, and actually setting those repair standards.

By maximising the opportunity for you to influence housing policy, Housing Services can ensure that the service provided best meets the needs of the majority of its residents, and at the same time is sympathetic to the particular requirements of minority groups.

To find out more contact the Housing Services team on **01233 330688**.

### **Ashford Back Chat**

This is a database of Ashford tenants and leaseholders who have agreed to participate in a range of ways from telephone surveys and mystery shopping to attending focus groups.

### **Ashford Borough Tenants' Forum**

This is a group of tenants who meet monthly, with staff and councillors, to debate and decide on issues affecting the housing service. Forum members are subject to a nomination and election process every three years.

### **Block Agreements**

This is an informal document for blocks of flats which sets out a series of promises and responsibilities of tenants, leaseholders and Housing Services and is signed by all parties.

### **Community Forums**

Community Forums give a voice to residents in the urban areas of the borough where there is no parish or town council. There are four in Ashford covering Willesborough, Kennington, Central, and South Ashford.

Visit [www.ashford.gov.uk/communityforums](http://www.ashford.gov.uk/communityforums).

### **Consultation and monitoring**

From time to time you are asked to give your views either on the whole housing service or specific aspects. For example every two years a random sample of tenants are

asked to complete a questionnaire, and the information from this is used to tell the government how we are performing.

### **Estate walkabouts**

These are held each week across different parts of the borough. We encourage tenants and leaseholders to join their area managers and walk around their local neighbourhood and point out problems and concerns.

Each urban neighbourhood will receive a walkabout twice a year, rural areas will receive one walkabout a year.

Walkabout times and dates are published in Housing News and on the council's website at [www.ashford.gov.uk/tenantparticipation](http://www.ashford.gov.uk/tenantparticipation).

### **Focus groups**

Focus groups meet periodically to look at and make comment on specific aspects of the service you receive from us. Payment is made for attending the focus groups.

### **Housing News**

This is the magazine for tenants and leaseholders produced by Housing Services which keeps you up to date with all the latest news. It aims to be interactive and we actively encourage tenants and leaseholders to submit articles, letters and information others may find useful or interesting.

### **Local Community Groups**

- **South Willesborough and Newtown Community Group**  
This is a formally constituted community group that works to find positive solutions to problems in the local area.
- **Wye Tenants Forum**  
This is an informal group which meets periodically to discuss estate issues.
- **Bybrook and Bockhanger Community Group**  
This is a formally constituted group which meets every other month to find solutions to estate issues in Bybrook and Bockhanger.

### **Mystery shopping**

Tenants and leaseholders who have agreed to take part in this scheme receive a supply of forms, which they can complete whenever they contact Housing Services, telling us how their query was dealt with. This information helps us improve our service to you.

### **Parish Councils**

Parish Councils are made up of elected local people who provide a voice for people living in rural areas. They can act in an advocacy role for tackling local issues. Find out more by visiting [www.ashford.gov.uk/parishcouncils](http://www.ashford.gov.uk/parishcouncils).

### **Repairs Monitoring Group**

This is a group of tenants who meet regularly with the repairs and maintenance contractors and staff to discuss performance and standards. It has terms of reference, and reports to the Ashford Borough Tenants' Forum.

### **Seniors' Forum**

This is a group of residents representing the borough's 12 sheltered housing schemes. They meet to discuss a range of issues relating to housing for older people.

### **South East Kent Tenant Participation Forum**

Tenant participation workers from housing organisations around South East Kent work together to arrange conferences, training, and information sharing events for their tenants and leaseholders.

### **Surgeries**

These are held in Children's Centres, Ashford and Tenterden Gateways, and some schools around the borough, enabling you to talk to housing staff while doing other things such as dropping off or picking up your children. The surgery details are published in Housing News and on the council's website at [www.ashford.gov.uk/tenantparticipation](http://www.ashford.gov.uk/tenantparticipation).



## Living in your community

### What is being a good neighbour?

Being a good neighbour is treating someone as you would expect to be treated. This will help to create a safe and welcoming environment for you and your neighbours to live.

You and your neighbours should not have to tolerate loud music, harassment and violence but you should be realistic in your expectations and accept that there will be some noise from your neighbours and the community around you.

### What can you do to help?

- Treat your house or flat with respect
- Do not leave rubbish out on the wrong day or where it can cause a problem for others
- Ensure you and your guests are always considerate of your neighbours
- Make sure your pets do not cause a disturbance to your neighbours



### Making an initial complaint about a problem

In the first instance you may consider discussing the problem with the person who is causing the problem. If you do not feel comfortable doing this then there are other alternatives such as mediation. You could also contact Housing Services or your local Community Police Officer/Police Community Support Officer depending on the severity of the problem.

### Incident logs

After you have made your initial complaint, a course of action will be agreed with Housing Services or Kent Police.

If you continue to suffer from persistent or regular anti-social behaviour, you must keep a record of any incidents that take place. This is very important as your logs can be used as evidence should further enforcement action need to be taken.

You can request incident logs from Housing Services or your local Police Community Support Officer.

### Mediation

Mediation is a process which allows individuals to find mutually beneficial solutions to problems, which they are struggling to find themselves.

Mediators act as peace makers between opposing sides. Mediation can be used in a number of different conflict situations. They can help you find your own solutions to the problems in confidence, without the trouble and expense of going to court. You are in control at all times. Mediators will never take action or do anything without your permission.

Ashford Mediation Service is an independent organisation offering mediation services free of charge. **To find out more visit [www.ashfordmediation.co.uk](http://www.ashfordmediation.co.uk) or call 01233 63488.**

### **Noise nuisance**

Noise nuisance is a common problem and affects many residents and communities. If you are affected by noise disturbance coming from a council owned property, please call the Housing Service team during working hours.

If the problem occurs outside normal office hours, or if the noise is coming from non-council owned property, you should call Ashford Borough Council's Environmental Health team. Again, it is important to keep incident logs as these can be used as evidence.

### **Harassment – disability, gender reassignment, race or sex**

Harassment means unwanted behaviour related to a protected characteristic that has the purpose or effect of violating a person's dignity or creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment for them.

Harassment is behaviour which hurts a person's pride or which is offensive.

For some time there have been laws to protect people from harassment at work and some people from harassment when they are buying goods or receiving services.

New legislation will also protect you from harassment related to disability when you're buying goods or receiving services.

New legislation also protects if you are harassed because you associate with someone who has a protected characteristic or because someone thinks you have a protected characteristic, for example if you are harassed because your son is gay, or because someone believes you are a Muslim. Harassment may be deliberate but it doesn't have to be. Someone could be harassing you even if they don't mean to or don't realise they are doing so.

If you are experiencing any type of harassment, there are various options you can take.

You should in the first instance contact your local Neighbourhood Police Officer or Police Community Support Officer who will advise you of the best course of action. (If you are in immediate fear for your safety you should ring 999).

All harassment reports are dealt with in a sensitive manner and in confidence.

Please be assured Housing Services take harassment reports very seriously.

### **Example**

Ahmed, a refugee from Afghanistan and a keen footballer, joins his local football club. Whenever he goes to a practice session the coach asks him why he does not go back to where he came from. Ahmed could bring a claim of harassment related to his race.

### **What has changed?**

Harassment protection has now been extended to disability and a single definition of harassment now applies to disability, gender reassignment, race and sex.

For further details see the Harassment Quick Start Guide.

[www.ashford.gov.uk/pdf/HarrassmentQuickGuide.pdf](http://www.ashford.gov.uk/pdf/HarrassmentQuickGuide.pdf)

### **Domestic abuse**

Domestic abuse is a crime and has a profound effect on many families and individuals.

If you are experiencing domestic abuse, we can offer advice and support through our Domestic Violence Prevention Officer. We also work closely with other organisations and can make relevant referrals to help you. All reports of domestic abuse will be dealt with in a sensitive manner and in confidence.

You can speak to our Domestic Violence Prevention Officer by calling the Housing Services team on **01233 330688**.

Or you may prefer to call the 24-Hour National Domestic Violence Help Line on **0808 2000 247**.

You should also contact your local Neighbourhood Police Officer or Police Community Support Officer.

Alternatively you can attend the Domestic Violence Drop In session at the Willow Centre, Brookfield Road, Ashford on Tuesday mornings between 9.30am and 12.30pm for free confidential advice.

### **Working with our partners**

We work closely with a number of agencies and partners to help ensure your community is a safe and happy place to live. We attend regular meetings with the local Community Safety Unit. These meetings enable a wide range of local agencies to tackle community issues and identify any individuals or groups of people that may be causing a problem within your community.

### **What can be done if the problem persists?**

We have a number of options available to us including:

- In partnership with Kent Police, we may ask an individual who is causing a problem to sign an Anti-Social Behaviour Agreement. This voluntary agreement will specify things that he or she must not do. If the terms of the agreement are broken, Kent Police can take further action
- We may seek to obtain an injunction to stop the person causing the problem
- Legal action can be taken if we feel that we have enough evidence to go to court. This may involve us asking the court for a demotion order, which will take away the tenants security of tenure. In extreme cases, we may ask the court for a possession order

Please remember that we cannot carry out these actions unless we have clear evidence and therefore need your support throughout the process.

## Moving home

### Housing Options

If your housing needs change and you would like advice about your options you can get advice from your area manager or from the Housing Options team at Ashford Gateway.

Our Housing Options team manages the housing register for Ashford Borough Council housing stock and nominations to housing associations who have properties in the borough.

We operate a choice based lettings system called Kent Homechoice. Following registration you will be given a level of priority depending on your needs and you will also be advised what group you are in. For existing tenants this will be the transfer group.

You will be given advice about how to access details of the properties that we have available and given the choice of expressing an interest in the properties you wish to be considered for so long as they meet your needs and are targeted to your group.

**Please note that demand for housing is high and therefore it is likely that only those with the highest housing needs will be able to be moved through the choice based lettings system.**

If you are interested in applying for a new home or transferring from your existing Ashford Borough Council home you can download the housing register application form from the council's website at [www.ashford.gov.uk/housingapplicationform](http://www.ashford.gov.uk/housingapplicationform).

Alternatively you can visit the Ashford Gateway to pick up a form. For more information contact the Housing Service team.

### Transfers

As an existing tenant you can apply for a transfer to a new home providing you meet certain criteria. You must pass a pre-transfer inspection before your transfer can take place. Your home must be in a suitable condition to be re-let to a new tenant.

You must be a secure tenant and cannot apply for a transfer if one or more of the following apply:

- You have an introductory or non-secure tenancy
- You are in breach of your tenancy agreement because you have rent arrears or you are guilty of causing anti-social behaviour

If you are informed you are not eligible for a transfer you may appeal in writing to the Head of Housing.

### **Assisted Move Scheme**

We are able to offer financial incentives if you are over 50 and are giving up family size accommodation. For further information contact the Housing Services team.

### **Older persons and sheltered accommodation**

#### **Bungalows**

There are a number of bungalows available for rent within the borough for people aged 50 and over. These bungalows have either one or two bedrooms with some equipped with personal alarm systems.

Some bungalows have adaptations which make them suitable for those who have a disability and need to have a property which assists with their needs, including wheelchair accessibility.

A few have three bedrooms and can be allocated to families who have a disabled family member.

#### **Sheltered Accommodation**

There are 12 schemes classified as 'sheltered' accommodation made up of flats and/or bungalows.

All properties, whether bungalows or flats, have their own front door to enable tenants to live independently.

There are 12 scheme managers who work a rotating shift pattern offering cover 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

The scheme manager's role is to offer support; this does not include personal care. This means that they will attend tenants' properties, when needed, throughout the 24 hour period, offering support to tenants to ensure they are safe and well and to enable them to live independently.

Each day all tenants are contacted in person or telephoned. Tenants may sign a disclaimer advising that they do not need a call/visit.

### **How can I apply for a move?**

If you decide you want to apply for a move, you will need to complete a housing application form. You will need to complete this thoroughly and attach a passport sized photograph for each applicant. Once your application has been received you will be notified of your unique reference number. You need this number to place bids for

available properties that are advertised in the bi-weekly Kent Homechoice magazine. You can place bids online, by phone, text and in writing.

We will contact you to arrange an initial inspection of your home. This inspection will check whether redecoration and repairs to your home are required. If you fail to meet our minimum criteria, you will not be able to move until you have completed the works to a satisfactory standard.

A similar inspection will also take place immediately after an offer of accommodation has been made to you.

### **Mutual Exchange**

You may have the right to exchange with another secure council tenant or an assured housing association tenant.

You must be a secure tenant and a mutual exchange can only take place if you have no rent arrears and the person you are exchanging with is happy to accept your property as seen. You can request a mutual exchange application form from the Housing Services team.

We are part of the Homeswap scheme. This is a national database of other local authority and housing association tenants who are looking to exchange their home. You can register for this service by visiting [www.homeswapper.co.uk](http://www.homeswapper.co.uk).

You can also register on the Kent Homechoice exchange scheme at [www.kenthomechoice.org.uk](http://www.kenthomechoice.org.uk). This scheme covers LA and HA tenants wishing to exchange within Kent.

Once you have found someone who would like to exchange homes, you will need to complete a mutual exchange application form.

Once applications from both tenants have been completed, we will complete an inspection of your property and any adaptations, poor decorative state and repairs will be reported to the person(s) you wish to exchange with.

Providing you are eligible for an exchange, we expect the completion of the exchange to take no longer than 42 days from the date of your initial application.

**Do not exchange homes without written consent from Ashford Borough Council.**

### **Right to Buy**

The Right to Buy scheme is available to enable secure tenants who have held a tenancy for at least five years to purchase their property. Most tenants have the right to buy.

The property will be valued at the current market value and discount awarded depending on how many years you have been a public sector tenant. The maximum discount is currently £38,000.

You will not be able to exercise your Right to Buy if:

- You do not have a secure tenancy
- You live in a property designated as sheltered accommodation

Your Right to Buy may not be accepted if your property is a bungalow or a ground floor flat, if:

- It was first let before 1st January 1990
- It is particularly suitable for occupation by elderly persons, taking into account its location and design
- If it was let for occupation to a person aged over 60

For more information contact the Housing Services team.

### **How do I end my tenancy?**

You can end your tenancy at any time by completing a notice to vacate, and you are required to give 28 days notice in writing, starting and ending on a Monday.

All keys for the property are to be returned to Housing Services on or before the termination date on the notice.

If you are transferring to another Ashford Borough Council property, you do not need to give us 28 days' notice. However, you must make sure that your keys are returned to us by noon on the start date of your new tenancy.

### **Leaving your home**

When you leave your home for the last time you must:

- Leave it in a clean and tidy condition
- Repair any damage that you have caused
- Remove all rubbish and belongings
- Leave your garden tidy
- Clear your attic and sheds

If you fail to do so we will charge you for the cost of the work.

## **Useful Contacts**

**Ball Contractors Ltd 01233 628743**

**Citizens Advice Bureau 01233 626185**

**Gas Contract Services Ltd 01634 295515**

**Gas - If you can smell Gas 0800 111 999**

**Gas Supplier (Gas supplier information) 0870 608 1524**

**Job Centre Plus 0845 604 3719**

**Mediation Services 01233 663488**

**Meter Point Administration Service (Electricity supplier information)  
0845 601 5467**

**Prima Service Ltd 0845 606 2607**

**Roalco 01233 628887**

**Royal Mail Re-direction 0845 774 0740**

**Shelter 0344 515 1444**

**South East Water 0845 850 6060**

**Southern Water 0845 272 0845**

**Swale Heating 0800 7311 886**

**Town & Country Cleaners Ltd 0800 389 4825**