



HOUSING MATTERS

Your homes, your news, your views



Welcome to your newsletter

Hello, welcome to Housing Matters, Ashford Borough Council's newsletter for our tenants and leaseholders. Affordable housing providers are under the spotlight and we wanted to let you know about the changes that are happening, the projects we're working on and, most importantly, how you can get involved.

You'll have a central part to play. We're looking for tenants to give honest feedback on our services, to shape our policies and the way we do things. Customers are, and will be at the heart of all that we do. Your safety and wellbeing is our number one priority. We must learn from your experiences and feedback – good and bad. We must learn how to be a better landlord.

In Housing Matters we'll not just include stories of where we're doing this right, we'll show you what we've learnt from where things haven't gone so well. And give a voice to those tenants. Because it's all about a balance of views.

We really want to know how you'd like us to communicate with you. Through a newsletter such as this? Electronically? Through smart technology? However you want to interact with us, we should be there. Please let us know, our services will only get better with your input.

Sharon Williams
Assistant Director Housing

Portfolio holder's view

"Hello, I'm Cllr Bill Barrett, the ward member for Singleton East. I'm absolutely delighted to have been appointed as the Portfolio Holder for Homes and Homelessness. I am passionate about social housing and reducing homelessness. I am really pleased to learn that we are improving our communication with you, our tenants. In this new era of social housing regulation, we are undoubtedly accountable to you and it's absolutely essential that you let us know where you feel we are getting things right and where you feel we aren't.

"We have bold plans for new housing schemes, for improving our services, for maintaining and repairing your homes, for retrofitting homes so they are more energy efficient – looking for solutions that work much better for residents in temporary accommodation and making sure they have homes to move in to more quickly. We can only learn how to do all of these things better if you tell us how we're doing. So please get in touch."



Survey is a chance to have your say

We will shortly be conducting our annual tenants' satisfaction survey.

This is the most important survey we will issue during the year. The Government has introduced 22 Tenant Satisfaction Measures (or TSMs). These judge whether we are keeping you safe in your home, whether we ensure your home is well-maintained and whether you think your neighbourhood is a nice place to live.

Some of the TSMs use data from the records we keep to measure things like gas and electrical safety, and that lifts work if you live in a block. Some are down to your perception of our services, such as repairs. How do you think we handle complaints or antisocial behaviour? Do you feel we listen to you and act on your feedback? Are you happy with the service we provide?

We will publish the results and then you can see how we are performing. This is why we want to hear from you and want you to tell us how you think we could improve.

You might recall we did a survey last year to all of our tenants. We had a good response rate but while 79% of residents said they were happy with our services overall, only 56% said they feel like we listen. That's not good enough.

Similarly, 79% of you felt you were happy that your homes is well maintained. We want that figure to be much higher. So what can we do to work with you to achieve better satisfaction ratings? We need you to tell us.

haveyoursay.ashford.gov.uk/tenants_communication_2023



E-bikes and E-scooters

Residents may have seen on TV and social media recently the news about the tragic death of three people due to a fire caused by the charging of an e-bike in the house. The charging of any battery vehicle is prohibited in the common areas of council blocks of flats and due to the risk of fire, advice from Kent Fire and Rescue Service (KFRS) is that charging in homes is done at a time when occupants are alert in case there is a fire, i.e. during the day when not asleep.

Fires caused by the charging of vapes is also rapidly increasing. Residents are advised to regularly test smoke alarms for early warning of any fire in the home. For the latest advice from KFRS visit www.kent.fire-uk.org/a-z/e-bikes-and-e-scooters

We're engaged!

Here are two people you will hopefully get to know well in the coming months. Sarah and Jo.

Sarah Sales and Jo Burns are our new Tenant Engagement Officers. They are here to make the changes we need to put you and your views and your feedback at the heart of everything that we do. They will help us design our services around you, they will ensure that we develop and keep a customer-focused attitude, remembering at all times that we are here to serve you.

Sarah's role is specific to the money we have been given (£5m) by Government to make improvements to some of our worst properties in terms of energy efficiency. If your home is one of the 727 homes we are tackling in the next two years, Sarah's job will be to ensure access and talk you through what will happen.

Jo's role is a bit wider. She will be looking at tenant engagement and how we involve you in all that we do. So, you'll see them out and about, they will be contacting you direct, they will be asking for your views and giving you opportunities to get involved in reviewing our services.

Say hello! They're here to help!



How do you want to hear from us?

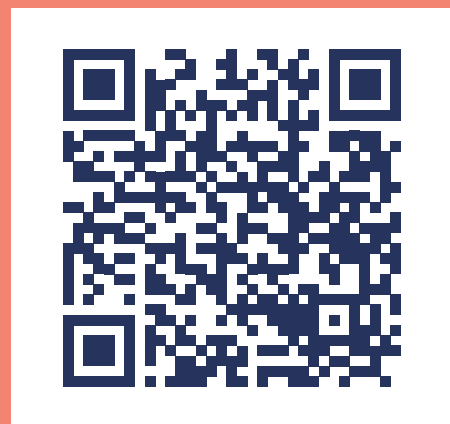
Do you get your news through a traditional paper, by watching TV or online? And how do you interact with your friends? How do you access information or raise an issue with the council?

Why are we asking? Well, we want to keep you informed about our projects, our services, the changes we are making as a direct result of your feedback, when estate inspections are taking place and when there are opportunities for you to get involved.

So how would you like to hear about these things? We will aim to send out a newsletter like this twice a year – it could be bigger than this – but that depends on how and where you get your information. Some people like printed things and others go online... but how do we make sure you hear about the things that matter to you?

Let us know your preferred method of communication!

tenant.contact@ashford.gov.uk



Tenants' portal

Did you know that the council has a portal specifically for our tenants? From there you can:

- View rent statements and make payments
- Request a new rent card
- Request a repair and view repairs
- Update personal details
- Mutual exchange guidance
- Send our Housing team a message

This is currently being refined and in a future newsletter we will tell you how to sign up and let you know about the new benefits.

For more information, visit: www.ashford.gov.uk/tenants-portal

Skipping with joy!

We are going to develop a programme for a big clear up across a number of areas where we own homes. This will see us providing manned skips and helping you to clear out any unwanted items from your home. This will help you if you are unable to get to the tip or pay for a bulk collection. Recently we did a clearance with A1 and removed several items from communal areas in Jubilee House, Gregory Court, Oak Tree House and Farrow Court, just to name a few! We removed engineering bricks, old desks, mattresses, freezers, washing machines and bags of rubbish. We'll let you know if we're coming to your area! Towers View residents watch out for further details!



Damp and mould update

You may remember we wrote to all tenants about damp and mould earlier this year. We asked for anyone who had any concerns to get in touch with us. At the time of writing we have completed 271 inspections and a further 191 are scheduled.

So far we have found 46 cases where urgent work was required. There have been 111 cases where advice was required and 114 cases where there was no cause for alarm. If you have any concerns about condensation, damp and mould we will investigate it. If you have any questions or queries please email damphelp@ashford.gov.uk



Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund

Being green is something we hear about all the time. Being a Green Pioneer is one of the council's main objectives. We want to lead the way in helping every community and individual play their part in Ashford becoming a carbon neutral borough, through a more sustainable way of life.

We have been awarded £5m through the Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund to improve the energy efficiency of 727 of our council homes. These are homes where the EPC (Energy Performance Certificate) rating is lower than a 'C'. These homes may have measures such as cavity wall insulation, external wall insulation or loft insulation fitted. They may have new windows as well. You will be told what will happen if your home is one of the ones in the programme.

To upgrade these 727 homes, which are the worst performing for energy efficiency out of all of the homes we have, the council will add £6.5m to the grant funding award. A further 500 or so homes will be 'retrofitted' in the near future. So, if you are contacted about this work, please respond. And we'll have your home improvements in hand!

A word about our staff

In this newsletter we have talked about what you can now expect from us. This is a brand new start for tenant engagement, your views matter more to us than ever before and what you tell us will ensure that we not only help you, but other tenants as we change the way we deliver our services.

Any complaints or constructive feedback are vital for us to hear because we can only put things right if you tell us what we are doing wrong.

But we also expect respect back. Recently we have had two cases where officers have been verbally abused to such an extent that we have had to take action against the tenants involved. One of them was found guilty in court and now has a criminal record. So this is just a reminder that we will not tolerate aggressive or threatening behaviour to our staff and we will follow through on threats of action being taken. We are here to help, and we want to help. Please don't push us away.

Open the door, let us in

There are a number of reasons why we may need to access your home. If you've asked us to carry out a repair you'll be waiting for us but what if we ask you about something you are not necessarily expecting?

We will need to access your home every year to undertake the servicing of your boiler (if you have an individual boiler rather than a 'plant room' in an independent living block, for example).

"We wouldn't ask unless it was important"

We may need to access your home to undertake 'retrofitting' work – see our article on the Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund.

We will be undertaking a stock condition survey. This is to get an accurate picture of all of the homes in our stock and what planned maintenance work is required to roofs, kitchens, bathrooms etc.

We wouldn't ask unless it was important. 'Compliance' (on things like boiler safety and electrical testing, for example) is not only a key thing that we are graded on by the Social Housing Regulator, but it's a key aspect of us keeping you safe in your own home.

We will always give you notice. Our staff will always have identification on them and we will tell you if it is a contractor from a different company who will be visiting your property on our behalf. If you are in any doubt at all, ring the main council number and housing will confirm the validity of the visit.

Get your finances in shape with Kent Savers!

If you are a resident of Ashford Borough Council, or any of our registered employers or housing providers, are over 18 and live, work, volunteer or study in Kent, Medway or Bexley you can join Kent Savers!

Saving is the best way to avoid needing to borrow but we all need some extra help from time to time, and Kent Savers' loans are designed to do just that.

You may have existing loans, credit cards or overdraft that have become expensive with the current cost of living pressures, or you may just need some extra help to smooth out the cost of household goods or buying school uniforms.

Kent Savers offers loans on a "save as you borrow basis". Regular savings soon build up into a nice pot, helping towards your financial goals and building a fitter future. Join us, set up a savings plan, save while repaying a loan or just deposit money when you like. It's up to you!

Find out more here!



Kent Savers Credit Union Limited
39-48 Marsham Street
Maidstone, Kent ME14 1HH

0333 321 9050
info@kentsavers.co.uk

 **Kent Savers**
Fair loans. Safe saving.

Don't struggle in silence

We know things are tough for many of our residents. We know that unfortunately there are immoral lenders could try to cash in on the rising cost of living as households try to cope with rising food, fuel and energy bills. Loan sharks are targeting vulnerable people seeking credit and trapping them into a cycle of debt. Loan sharks pose a dangerous threat to all communities. They charge incredibly high interest rates and target the most vulnerable, sometimes through aggressive tactics.

Fortunately, the council is here to help. If you are struggling to pay your rent please talk to your neighbourhood housing officer or our welfare intervention officers. They can help you with:

- Council Tax advice, including Council Tax debt advice
- Claiming Council Tax reduction or housing benefit
- Claiming Discretionary Housing Payments or Council Tax Exceptional Circumstances Payments
- General housing advice, including advice regarding rent arrears
- Referrals for homelessness advice
- General advice around claiming other benefits and support, such as Universal Credit, Foodbank vouchers, and other Department for Work and Pension benefits

See how they can help you at www.ashford.gov.uk/welfare-reform

Contact Us

- How do I pay my rent? Visit www.ashford.gov.uk and click on 'pay' then 'pay your rent'
- How do I report a repair or anti-social behaviour? Visit www.ashford.gov.uk/report and scroll down to 'housing and community'
- Who is my neighbourhood housing officer?
www.ashford.gov.uk/housing-officer
- How do I complain and what is your complaints procedure?
www.ashford.gov.uk/housing-complaints-procedure
(make a formal complaint under 'Stage 1- resolution')
- How do I report damp and mould in my property?
Email damphelp@ashford.gov.uk

 **Ashford**
Borough Council