



HOUSING MATTERS

Your homes, your news, your views

Hello

Welcome to the Winter edition of Housing Matters, a newsletter for tenants and leaseholders of Ashford Borough Council. This is our first newsletter of 2024, helping to keep you informed about your Housing Service.



If you would prefer a larger text version of this newsletter please contact Tenant Engagement on **01233 330573** or email tenant.contact@ashford.gov.uk to send you a copy.

Did you know?

You can get up-to-date housing news any time from our dedicated webpage?

www.ashford.gov.uk/housing-news

We regularly add articles to keep you informed about all things housing, from consultations you can take part in that help shape the service, to upcoming projects in your area.

You can also sign up there for a version of this newsletter to be sent to your inbox every quarter, helping to save the environment, and save hassle by clicking directly through on featured weblinks.

Competition time!

Where is our Eat Well, Spend Less event being held in April? The answer can be found within this newsletter. Answers can be emailed along with your name, address and telephone number to tenant.contact@ashford.gov.uk. One lucky tenant or leaseholder, drawn at random from the correct entries, will win a £25 Love2shop voucher. Closing date for entries is 31st March 2024.

Congratulations to our previous winner, Mr Green, who won our voucher in the Autumn edition.

Full competition terms and conditions: www.ashford.gov.uk/housing-matters-comp

Rent - 1 week free!

This year has 53 weeks rather than the usual 52. This additional week will be free for all ABC tenants (unless a payment plan or court order is in place) and no rent will be requested for it.

Some housing providers are still requesting tenants pay for this extra week, however we feel this is unfair and our tenants should get something back from us.



New pet policy

We recognise that pet ownership can be very beneficial for the wellbeing of our tenants, improving mental health, reducing loneliness, and can help maintain a healthy and active lifestyle. We have created a pet policy to balance the wellbeing of every animal in our properties and the surrounding community.

The policy largely applies to new tenants or existing tenants that wish to have new pets. Permission will be given for a pet if the property is suitable and responsibilities of looking after pets are taken on. We will also take into consideration whether the tenancy has been breached in any way.



The Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005, applies to virtually all premises including communal areas in blocks of flats and other multi-occupied dwellings. Part of the legislation involves landlords taking reasonable steps to reduce the risk from fire and to ensure people can escape safely if a fire does occur.

As part of this process, we require items kept in communal areas to be removed so that they do not cause an obstruction for exiting the building in the event of a fire or potentially catch alight.

Housing Officers will be working together with our safety team, the local fire and rescue service and tenants, to ensure that these safety regulations are adhered to. Notice will be given to tenants for any items that require removal, and any items not removed in a set timeframe will be arranged for removal by the team. Please note that all tenancy agreements state that communal areas in flats must be kept clear.



If you are an existing tenant that already has pets that we are unaware of, please get in touch. You will be asked to sign a pet contract and expected to look after your pet according to the new policy.

For more information and a copy of the pet application form please contact your Neighbourhood Housing Officer or visit our webpage www.ashford.gov.uk/pet-policy

Mind the gap

Did you know that Kent County Council (KCC) is responsible for repairs to most public roads?

If you see potholes, please report them to KCC online at www.kent.gov.uk/potholes where you can upload photos and a description of their location, or by telephoning them on **03000 414141**



Repairs team update

Our new in-house responsive repairs team started operating on the 1st December last year. Since that date, they have been busy putting plans in place to get back on track, recruiting new tradespeople, inspectors, and customer service staff to the team.

When we announced that repairs were coming in-house, the resounding feedback from tenants was positive. We share that view too and are looking forward to repairs being dealt with more efficiently. Even with clearing historic legacy repairs, the team were able to fix more than 9 out of 10 jobs on the first visit to a repair job in December.



**Repairs
fixed first
time 91%**

Dec 23



The team have looked into our published repairs response times and have now graded the categories of repair in more detail.

They have set more realistic timescales for certain types of repair jobs to manage expectations. These repair standards can be seen in our new repairs handbook and on our repairs standard webpage www.ashford.gov.uk/our-repairs-standard

We hope that you are receiving a more fit-for-purpose repairs service from us. If for any reason you are unhappy with the service we are providing, please get in touch with our repairs team to see how we can rectify the problem.

Results from repairs consultation

Thank you to everyone who took part in our repairs consultation survey and attended focus groups that we held towards the end of last year. The results have been fed into an action plan for the team and we are currently rolling suggestions out.

A full summary of survey feedback and action plans can be found on our webpage www.ashford.gov.uk/repairs-consult

Repairs HANDBOOK

How to report a repair

- Online**
Use our webpage to report non-urgent repairs. There is a step-by-step picture guide to assist. Photographs of your issue can be uploaded.
www.ashford.gov.uk/report-a-repair
- Telephone**
Our customer service is to call between 8.30am-5.30pm on 01233 335566.
We also provide an out of hours service on the same telephone number.
www.svaleheating.com
- Email**
General non-emergency repairs: housing.repairs@ashford.gov.uk
For heating and hot water repairs: enquiries@svaleheating.com
- Tenants Portal**
Register as a user to our Tenants Portal and report your repair directly through the app.
www.ashford.gov.uk/tenants-portal
- My Ashford app**
Register as a user to the My Ashford app and report your repair using this portal to all council services.
www.ashford.gov.uk/myashford

Ashford Borough Council

5

You said

We did

- **Almost double the telephone staff** triaging repairs calls
 - 7 repairs customer service handlers now employed
- **Improved repairs handbook**
 - Available in large or small print and other languages upon request
 - Clearer responsibilities
 - Easier to read
 - Key information highlighted
- **Realistic repair times** assessed and publicised
- **Repairs performance** and service levels to be regularly published online from April
- **Additional reporting methods** such as webchat and out of hours services being investigated
- **Focus on repairs complaints** and addressing issues

Make Things Right Campaign



Make things right

Everyone deserves a home that is safe, secure, and well maintained. We are backing a Government campaign that aims to ensure that those living in social housing who have issues with their home, know their rights, how to make a complaint, and feel empowered knowing that their voice will be heard.

If you have an issue with your home or us, there are ways to make things right.

The three-step process

1

Report to your landlord. If the problem is not fixed...

2

Complain through your landlord's complaint process, and if you are not happy with the final response from your landlord...

3

Escalate your complaint to the Housing Ombudsman where they will investigate the issue fairly and impartially, and can order us to take action.

1

Reporting repairs

Call: 01233 330366

Email: housing.repairs@ashford.gov.uk

Web: www.ashford.gov.uk/report-a-repair

Apps: Tenants Portal or My Ashford

Reporting tenancy issues

Call your Housing Officer or 01233 330688

Email your Housing Officer or housing@ashford.gov.uk

Apps: Tenants Portal or My Ashford

Address: Civic Centre, TN23 1PL (between 8.30am-4pm)

2

Raising a complaint

Call: 01233 331111

Email: complaints@ashford.gov.uk

Web: www.ashford.gov.uk/complaints

Address: Ashford Borough Council, Civic Centre, Tannery Lane, Ashford, Kent, TN23 1PL

Chat to any member of staff to raise on your behalf

3

Escalate to the Ombudsman

Call: 0300 111 3000

Email: info@housing-ombudsman.org.uk

Web: www.housing-ombudsman.org.uk

Address: Housing Ombudsman Service

PO Box 152, Liverpool L33 7WQ

You can also contact your MP or a local councillor and ask them to contact us about your complaint or they can contact the Housing Ombudsman Service for you.

The Ombudsman can be contacted at any stage of your complaint, however they will not investigate until our formal complaints process has been completed.

4

For more news: www.ashford.gov.uk/housing-news

As safe as houses

We recommend all tenants have contents insurance to protect belongings against theft, fire, vandalism, burst pipes, and other household risks. We have partnered with a company called Thistle Tenant Risks who offer insurance specifically for social housing tenants called the Crystal Insurance Scheme.

They offer flexible payment options, such as fortnightly or monthly by cash (at post office/pay zone outlets), monthly via direct debit, or annually by cheque, postal order, debit/credit card). Anyone living in social housing is eligible. They do not perform credit checks and do not ask the baffling array of questions that other insurance companies ask, such as what type of door lock you have!

They can be contacted by phone on **0345 450 7286** and you can request a call back at a time convenient to you. Cover can also be applied for via their website **www.crystal-insurance.co.uk** where more detail about what they offer can be found. Please note other companies also offer contents insurance.



Housing stock condition surveys

Surveys to look at the quality of our housing stock are getting underway. Regular assessments of homes allow us to prioritise maintenance and improvement projects based on the urgency or severity of issues.

Appointments will be made with tenants, and surveys should take around an hour to carry out. We encourage all appointments to be kept, as assessing homes is vital for us to maintain and improve living standards, ensure safety, and promote better well-being for residents. A contractor will be on hand to target any properties requiring urgent repair.

Money has been set aside for the next five years to address any repair issues found during this survey work with the average spend per year, per property, set at £1,200.



Estate Walkabouts

Our next estate walkabouts to check for any issues and chat to tenants are:

26 February - Hillbrow and Clockhouse

11 March - Newtown

25 March - Willesborough and South Willesborough

If there are any issues that you would like to tell us about before our visits, or meet us there on the day, please get in touch with Tenant Engagement via email on **tenant.contact@ashford.gov.uk** or call **01233 330573**.



Eat Well, Spend Less

Housing Officers attend Eat Well, Spend Less events, regularly held across the borough. It is a one-stop shop for housing advice as well as other community services and organisations, such as food and hygiene banks. Come along, we would love to meet you. The next events run from 10am-2pm at:

29 February

St Mary's Community Centre,
Rylands Road, TN23 1QG

17 April

St Francis Church & Hall,
Cryol Road, TN23 5AS

Did you know?

Since April last year we have replaced 119 kitchens and 43 bathrooms, upgraded 125 heating systems and completed 218 disabled adaptations.

HELP & ADVICE

Each issue, we will help promote schemes that can help tenants with the everyday cost of living and to help support your wellbeing. Please remember that our Welfare Intervention Team and Housing Officers are always there to provide advice.



Kent Money Advice Hub

Are you struggling with the cost of living?

You are never alone. The Kent Money Advice Hub run by in partnership with KCC, the DWP and Citizens Advice can help with budgeting, money saving tips, claiming benefits, and dealing with debt. Their service is free and confidential, and they are independent of ABC, creditors, and the government.

Call them for free on **0808 175 6406**, visit their website **kentmoneyadvicehub.com** to arrange a video call, or visit the kiosk at The Willow Children's Centre on Brookfield Road, TN23 4EY (weekdays 9-4pm).

Remember you can always talk to your Housing Officer that deals with rents if you are concerned about rental payments.



Supporting those in the Armed Forces

There are many resources available for those that have been, or are currently in, our armed forces, as well as their families. Forces Connect is an app available on Android and iOS which provides links to supporting organisations for an array of areas including support for mental health and physical wellbeing, employment and housing. The app is free, there are no adverts, and it can be used offline.

Op COURAGE is a free mental health service provided by the NHS. It provides the information and guidance you need to navigate civilian life. You can refer yourself and can talk to them on **0300 365 2000**. Their website with more information is **www.opcouragestheseas.nhs.uk**.

Ashford Borough Citizens Advice

If you're behind on your bills or going into debt to pay them, the best thing you can do is take action. You might be able to claim extra benefits to help you increase your income, such as cost of living payments, Household Support Fund, and Universal Credit. Ashford Borough Citizens Advice provides free, independent, confidential, and impartial advice to help resolve problems, from debt and employment to housing and consumer rights.

They have offices in Ashford and Tenterden with drop-in hubs at Woodchurch and High Halden, and can provide advice over the phone or on **01233 626185** or **ashfordadvice@gmail.com**. For dates and time of drop-ins across all locations please visit **www.ashfordadvice.org**.

ABC's Welfare Intervention Team provide support for the service at drop-ins too. To see the dates and times of those, and for more detail, please visit **www.ashford.gov.uk/welfare-reform**.



Warm spaces

Four of our independent living (Dahlia) schemes have been designated as Warm Spaces this winter to provide a welcoming and comfortable environment for local people of any age to meet and socialise.

You will find a free hot drink and biscuits, range of activities, support and advice, accessible facilities, parking, and free Wi-Fi.

We have organised for other professionals to attend to provide advice and guidance, such as benefits advisors and Kent Fire & Rescue.

They can be found, until the end of February, at:

**Danemore, Beachey Path, Tenterden - every Thursday
12 noon - 3pm**

**Luckley House, Little Chequers, Wye - every Tuesday
10.30am - 3.30pm**

**Farrow Court, Stanhope Road, Ashford - every Tuesday
10am - 3pm**

**East Stour Court, Mabledon Avenue, Ashford - every Thursday
9.30am - 12 noon**

For more information visit www.warmwelcome.uk



Water Saving Devices

Water saving devices are to be fitted to homes, which could save tenants up to £300 per year across energy and water bills. The device regulates the flow of water and stabilises water pressure, resulting in water being heated more efficiently.

The savings in water quantities used by the borough will also help to unlock new housing developments where water neutrality is required. We will work with a contractor to help fit these devices into properties and look forward to the savings our tenants should achieve.

More details will be available soon.



Waste and recycling services new contract

From 24th March all domestic waste and recycling services for the borough will be carried out by a new contractor called SUEZ. Keep an eye out for information regarding the new service from our Environmental, Property and Recreation team that will be publicised, sent to you by post, and available on our website www.ashford.gov.uk/waste.



Short-stay accommodation

Our project to bring 23 units of short-stay apartments to a site at Henwood is starting to take shape. The modular pods are a mix of one, two and three bed dwellings, and are currently being manufactured. They are designed to create zero operational carbon homes with very low energy consumption and running costs. Due to their modular nature, installation disruption to the surrounding area should be kept to a minimum.

The units will be a stepping stone until individuals or households who have become homeless are able to move to more permanent accommodation.

All apartments will have their own front door, private balconies and landscaped communal gardens, with parking bays provided. The Henwood scheme allows for homeless people to enjoy better living conditions whilst ensuring we are also mindful of the environment.

Tenant Engagement Strategy

Our engagement team have created a strategy to ensure that your voice is heard and that we provide opportunities for you to co-produce and scrutinise what we do. This was approved by Cabinet on 25th January and we will be championing the needs of tenants and creating a variety of ways for you to get involved. Whether it be keeping informed through our newsletters, or joining us on focus group panels and activity days, such as litter picking and estate tidy-ups. If you want to get involved we have something for you!



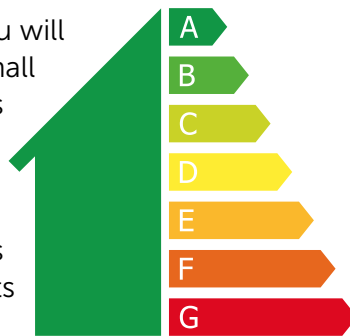
A copy of the strategy and its action plan can be found at www.ashford.gov.uk/tenant-engagement-strategy We have a three-year detailed list of plans to ensure that we engage with our tenants before we act. We will help ensure that our service is more transparent and accountable than ever before, that we improve our communications, and that you are at the heart of what we do.

If you would like to chat about the strategy or talk to our engagement team please email Jo on tenant.contact@ashford.gov.uk or call **01233 330573**.

Our Tenant Satisfaction Survey results are going to Cabinet in March. We will then be able to share those results and our action plans for the coming year with you.

SHDF update

For those properties involved in the Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund (SHDF) you will start to see measures being installed. A small site for Baxter Kelly and E.On, our partners for installing the energy efficiency measures, has popped up behind Swan House on Bybrook Road. We can't wait to see the EPC ratings for these properties improve and for tenants to see the benefits of becoming more energy efficient.



Healthy New Year

There are a vast range of clubs and organisations across the borough to help you get active this year, including the larger facilities on offer at the Stour and Tenterden Leisure Centres. To find your next fitness-fix visit our Active Ashford webpage www.ashford.gov.uk/active-ashford

Awaab's Law consultation

The government is running a consultation to seek views on its proposals for new requirements and obligations regarding repair timescales and how repairs are dealt with. You are invited to complete an online survey by 5 March at consult.levellingup.gov.uk/social-housing/awaabs-law-consultation-on-timescales-for-repairs

Awaab's Law is part of the Social Housing (Regulation) Act and was founded on campaigning from the family of Awaab Ishak who died in Rochdale in December 2020, due to a severe respiratory condition from prolonged exposure to mould in his home. His tragic death has highlighted the need to eradicate hazards in social homes and to improve standards to ensure that tragedies like this do not occur again.

Useful contacts

Report repairs or damp/mould: www.ashford.gov.uk/report-a-repair or call **01233 330366**

Raise a complaint: www.ashford.gov.uk/complaints or call **01233 331111**

Your Neighbourhood Housing Officer: www.ashford.gov.uk/housing-officer or call **01233 330688**

Housing help and advice: www.ashford.gov.uk/housing-help

Welfare Intervention Team: www.ashford.gov.uk/welfare-reform or call **01233 331111**

Tenant Engagement Team: www.ashford.gov.uk/tenant-engagement or call **01233 330573**