



HOUSING MATTERS

Your homes, your news, your views

Hello

Welcome to our Autumn edition of Housing Matters, a newsletter for tenants and leaseholders of Ashford Borough Council. This is our second newsletter helping to keep you informed about your Housing Service. In this issue we will cover a variety of topics including news about repairs, your Housing officers and tenant engagement. As this issue is digital, you can click on links to take you directly to any webpages or contact links as you go!



Competition time!

How many tenants have signed up to our Tenant Portal? 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 30th November 2023.

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

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Bringing repairs in house

Our main contractor, Equans, who have been providing the vast majority of our day-to-day repairs service, gave notice to end their contract with us this year. This means that from 1st December, our responsive repairs service (those repairs that are not part of planned works) will be coming in house within the council.

Working with Housing Quality Network, a consultant specialising in the housing sector, it was identified that by bringing repairs in house we should achieve a significant increase in satisfaction levels for our tenants and leaseholders. It could also lead to potential savings of at least £500,000 per year which can be reinvested into our housing stock.

With an in-house team, we can be directly accountable to our tenants, we will have more control over our repairs and we can be more responsive to our tenants' needs.

Repair requests can still be reported via the [tenant portal](#) or Your Ashford app, online at www.ashford.gov.uk/report-a-repair or via telephone on 01233 330366

**Did you know?
So far this year:**

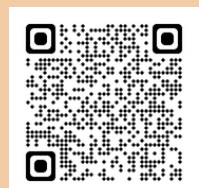
6,085
repairs completed

1.2
average repairs per
home

£362
average repair cost

What would you like from your repairs service?

We want your input into how you feel your repairs service should be run. A short survey can be completed using the QR code or by using the following link: haveyoursay.ashford.gov.uk/2023repairs



Tenant satisfaction

A big thank you to all 1,015 of you who took part in our annual tenant satisfaction survey that has recently closed. The survey results will be passed to the Regulator and we will publish the results shortly and let you know how we have done. The survey forms part of the new Tenant Satisfaction Measures which rate various elements of the housing service, allowing us, the Regulator, and most importantly you, to track our performance.



We need you!

We are currently working on our Engagement Strategy and providing opportunities to consult and collaborate with you all year round. If you would like to get involved in helping shape your housing service please get in touch with Jo on tenant.contact@ashford.gov.uk or call for a chat on 01233 330573. There will be something for everyone, with options to get involved as little or as much as you would like from scrutiny panels to ad-hoc surveys and polls. Thank you to all tenants and leaseholders that have already been in touch.



Newsletter feedback

We asked how you would like us to communicate with you. The feedback received so far is that a newsletter via email is preferred. Therefore, for this edition we have gone digital and the newsletter will be sent out via email and available to view on our website. It means any links are easily clickable and keeping it digital ensures that we can be as green as possible too!

Please provide us with up to date contact information (especially email addresses) so that we can keep in touch with you more easily and regularly.

If you prefer a printed copy, get in touch and we can pop one in the post to you.

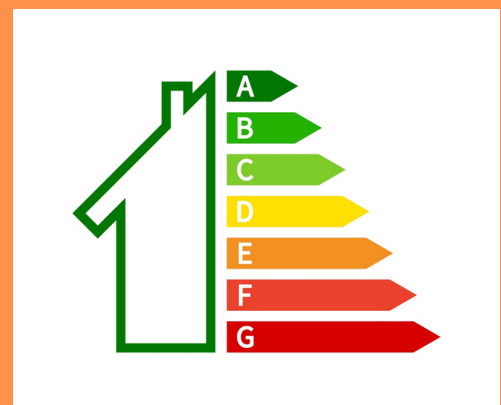
You're the voice

We are looking at a more tailored digital newsletter going forward and will be chatting to tenants to see what matters to you and what you want to read about. We would love to hear your stories - whether you've been a resident with us for many years or have recently moved in.

If you have any interesting articles, good news stories or want to let us know what is happening in your area we can include that too. This newsletter is a chance for you to share what's great about your community. Get in touch with [Tenant Engagement](#).

Social housing decarbonisation fund

Our programme of retrofitting and improving properties that have low energy efficiency continues, with over half now surveyed and improvements to be made being confirmed. If you are one of the 727 properties that have been contacted as part of the scheme, and you have any questions, please get in touch with Sarah on shdtenantcontact@ashford.gov.uk or call 01233 330598



Welcome home

We have had some new housing officers join the team over the past couple of months, meaning that we are fully staffed and ready to champion our tenants and communities. We would like to say a warm welcome to new Neighbourhood Housing Officers, Mandy Bushell, Robert Perfitt and Georgia Anderson.

We have also seen two new apprentices start in the Housing team who are getting involved across all aspects of our varied service. Krystian and Ruben are bringing fresh ideas and energy to the team and helping us assist our tenants and housing officers.

If you are unsure of who your Neighbourhood Housing Officer is for your area, their details can be found on www.ashford.gov.uk/housing-officer

Estate mates

Housing officers take part in a rotating schedule of monthly estate reviews and walkabouts. They take a look at communal areas both inside and outside of properties and will report back any repairs or maintenance work that is required. They will also report other issues such as fly-tipping, accumulations of rubbish and garden maintenance.

We would love people to get in touch to become key people, or 'estate mates', to meet with us on these visits to let us know of any concerns or issues on behalf of their community.

We are currently scheduling next year's visits so get in touch with Jo our Tenant Engagement Officer on tenant.contact@ashford.gov.uk if you would like to represent your area.

As always, if you note something of concern in your area at any time, please report via our [website](#), Your Ashford App or [Tenant Portal](#).



Can they fix it? Yes they can!

Did you know that we have three new handypersons in the team? They will be there to make light work of DIY jobs for tenants that are unable to tackle them due to their circumstances.

George and Steve will work across our Independent Living sites and Tommy will be providing a DIY service across the borough for other tenants.

They have made an amazing difference to tenant's lives, homes and gardens already.

Welcome aboard!



Pleased to meet you

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 a food and hygiene bank. Come along, we would love to meet you. The next events run from 10am-2pm at:

Willesborough Baptist Church -
1st Nov
Repton Community Centre - 29th
Nov

Payment peace of mind

A third of all rent payments are still being paid manually each month. With so much going on at this time of the year, making payments this way can easily be forgotten.

Direct debits and standing orders are simple and easy ways to arrange recurring payments. By setting them up to pay your rent (and other bills) you can be reassured that you will always pay on time. Please remember that if you are having problems with making rental payments, chat to your housing officer or our welfare team. They will be able to provide you with advice.



Anti-social behaviour

A new anti-social behaviour (ASB) policy has been approved by the council which provides clarity on how we meet our responsibilities. Teams across the council will be working together to ensure that our procedures and team can provide support and assistance for those that are experiencing anti-social behaviour.

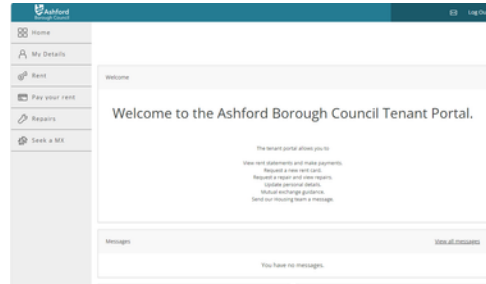
We are currently developing another way to report ASB within our Tenant Portal app. This will provide an additional way to inform us of concerns you may have with neighbours or those within the community. It will also allow you to track the progress of any cases that you have reported. For advice and more details about ASB please go to www.ashford.gov.uk/anti-social-behaviour

Tenant Portal

We have 842 tenants already signed up to our Tenant Portal. If you've not yet taken the plunge, then this the time! There are so many things that you can do easily in the app 24/7 such as:

- Make rent payments and check statements
- Report and view repairs
- Send our housing team a message

With new features being added all of the time it provides an easy way to be kept informed and keep in touch with us. Visit www.ashford.gov.uk/tenants-portal to sign up.



Fixed term moving to lifetime tenancies

Like many social landlords, we are continuing to phase out fixed term tenancies - these are ones that last for fixed periods, such as five years. We require all tenants that are currently on fixed term agreements to sign and move across to a secure Lifetime Tenancy.

There are a number of tenants that will benefit from moving to lifetime tenancies and it should encourage more sustainable, thriving communities by reducing short term rentals. All applicable tenants will be contacted to arrange for paperwork to be signed.

Deciding to downsize

If you are living in a larger property and are thinking about moving into smaller accommodation, you may be eligible for one of our incentives.

- £1,000** for downsizing and releasing family accommodation
- £500** extra for releasing four bedroom accommodation
- £500** up to this amount towards removal costs

By downsizing you could benefit from reduced household costs and you would be providing a much needed larger home for families. Our team are on hand to provide practical advice and support, and assist with planning your move. For more information please visit www.ashford.gov.uk/downsizing.

Independent living news

We have a special mention for Joan Sharp, one of our residents at Baxendale Court, who has recently been honoured with the Mayor's Achievement Award for her continued hard work and dedication in raising funds for Macmillan Cancer Support

Joan, lives at Baxendale Court in Newtown, a Dahlia independent living scheme run by Ashford Borough Council, and has organised an annual Macmillan coffee morning for the past 15 years, raising hundreds of pounds every year.



The Mayor and Mayoress of Ashford present the award to Joan Sharp

There are 10 Dahlia schemes located across the borough. Our provision of accommodation for older residents provides more choice and variety of independent living options. Each dwelling has 24-hour support from our telecare service and are managed by our Independent Living Officers. With shared spaces within schemes, it gives the opportunity for residents to get involved with a variety of activities and provides a vibrant and enjoyable place to live.

Telecare upgrades

We are currently looking into the upgrade of our lifeline telecare systems. This essential service is moving from an analogue system to a digital one, due to the whole of the UK switching to digital lines by the end of 2025.

We would like to reassure users of the service that it will always be available and the team will keep you informed of the progress of procuring and rolling out a new system.

New digital telecare systems have a range of 'smart' add-ons that could really benefit some tenants, such as bed or chair occupancy sensors to notify if someone has been away for a long time, or medication dispensers and reminders.

Complaints How can we do better?



We recognise that we do not always get it right and are committed to analysing each complaint to see how things can be put right and ensure that we learn from mistakes. We are unhappy with our current levels and are looking to address the causes of our complaints.

Complaints concluded	April - September
Stage 1	118
Stage 2	24
Ombudsman	2

Around 58% of complaints received have been about repairs and maintenance. With the responsive repairs service coming in house shortly, we will be looking to address these issues. Another reason why it is vitally important to tell us what you need from a repairs service by giving your views in our [Responsive Repairs Survey](#) being run until the 24th November on our website haveyoursay.ashford.gov.uk/2023repairs.

How are we doing?

We are working hard to improve our services to you and provide value for money. We thought you would like to have a look at our forecasts showing where money is being spent, as well our performance so far this year. Usually we publish these statistics in our Housing Annual Report but we wanted to show where we are, half way through the financial year.

Projected spend 2023-24 - £36m

Replacement & new development contributions £13m

Loan repayments & interest £10m

Supervision & management admin £7m

Repairs & maintenance £6m

Projected income 2023-24 - £36m

Rents £29m

Transfers from reserves £6m




Service charges £1m


Leaseholder charges £147k

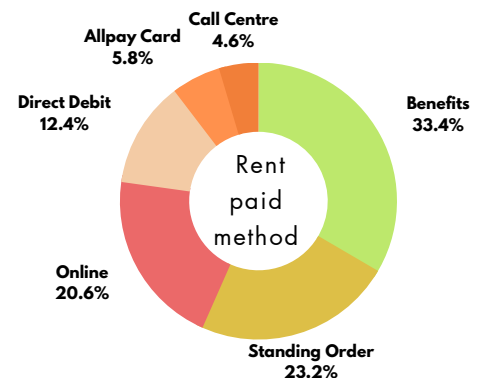
Solar income £65k

Miscellaneous rent £4.6k

Performance so far this year, April to September

Repairs 		Voids (empty properties) 		Rent collected & spend 	
Completed repairs	6,085	Number of voids	158	Rent collected as % of rent due	97.4%
Total cost	£2.2m	Void repairs completed	290	New kitchens	£265k
Average cost per repair	£362	Void repairs cost	£856k	New bathrooms	£178k
Emergency repairs	1,410	Average time void	31 days	New boilers/heating	£288k
Emergency repairs cost	£128k	Rent lost due to void properties	£92.2k	Insulation	£140k

Disabled adaptations 			
Number of adaptations	136	Cost of adaptations	£360k



Spotlight on damp and mould

We want all tenants to let us know as soon as possible about any damp and mould concerns that they might have within their home. We will investigate any reports and look to provide advice and solutions to help combat this. If the damp is caused by an underlying repair issue we will arrange repairs to be carried out.

There are ways which can help to reduce the potential for damp and mould such as ventilating or opening windows following activities that generate condensation such as bathing or cooking, and keeping your home warm where possible. More information and guidance can be found on www.ashford.gov.uk/damp-and-mould

If you have concerns please contact damphelp@ashford.gov.uk

You are not alone

Our housing team are all here to help with practical advice and guidance to all our tenants. Our neighbourhood housing officers can investigate any concerns with your home or our housing service, while our welfare intervention team can check to see that you are receiving the right benefits and financial support.

The welfare team can give practical advice, assist with completing council forms, if you require assistance, and signpost to other helpful organisations. They also run drop in advice sessions where no appointment is required. Their contact details and more can be found at www.ashford.gov.uk/welfare-reform

Please remember that you are not alone. We are here to support you.

Be prepared

The evenings are starting to get darker and definitely chillier so it is a good time to start preparing for winter. If you haven't already popped it on, it is worth double-checking that your heating system is working well before a really cold spell hits. Test your system and if you have any issues please do not hesitate to report it to us.

Please remember that portable gas and paraffin heaters are not allowed under the terms of your tenancy agreement due to increased risk of fire.



Off grid heating and hot water

We have received funding from Kent County Council to develop a number of schemes to support households up until the end of March 2024.

One of the schemes supported is for those that are not connected to mains gas and rely upon 'off grid' heating and hot water supply e.g. domestic oil heating and LPG. There is energy grant funding available to assist with the cost of living. Our first round of applications has closed, however funding is still available. For more information go to www.ashford.gov.uk/household-support-fund-information

KEEP IN TOUCH

Report a repair or anti-social behaviour: www.ashford.gov.uk/report

Report damp and mould in your property: damphelp@ashford.gov.uk

Raise a complaint: www.ashford.gov.uk/housing-complaints-procedure

Your Neighbourhood Housing Officer: www.ashford.gov.uk/housing-officer

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

Welfare Intervention Team: www.ashford.gov.uk/welfare-reform

Tenant Engagement Team: tenant.contact@ashford.gov.uk