

Summer 2020

# voice

**Informative news and advice** from Watford Community Housing

- Our response to the coronavirus crisis
- Supporting communities during the pandemic
- Making it easier for you to give us feedback
- Improving your repairs service
- Offering a lifetime of security
- And more!



**watford**  
community  
housing

# Supporting people through the coronavirus pandemic

It's been a strange and challenging few months for all of us, as we have faced the coronavirus pandemic together. Here's what we've done to maintain vital services while making sure we keep people safe.

**Throughout the pandemic, our top priority has remained the safety and wellbeing of our customers, staff and communities. In the early stages of the outbreak, this meant making vital changes to some of our services. We've also increased the level of support and assistance we offer, to help people impacted by coronavirus.**

When lockdown began, non-emergency repairs were put on hold along with new lettings and other services. This allowed us to comply with the government's new rules and help keep people safe, while still delivering emergency services when they were needed.

Like all businesses, we had to adapt quickly to the crisis, with most of our staff having to work from home. This meant that we had to roll out new equipment so that everyone could work remotely and put new systems in place so that our Customer Service team could continue to answer your calls while our Gateway House office was closed.

We also knew that the lockdown would affect everyone in our communities differently. With this in mind, we contacted our most vulnerable customers directly to make sure they had all the support and information they needed.

## Up and running

Since the beginning of the lockdown, we have continued to carefully monitor all of the government guidance as changes have been made to the rules. Most of our services have now resumed, following the latest advice.

We've implemented a wide range of health and safety measures to ensure our staff and customers' safety when we're delivering these services. This means we are now donning our gloves and masks, and following a heightened hygiene regime to keep services such as repairs and lettings up and running.

With a backlog of repairs to work through, there may be a delay in completing any non-emergency works you've requested. Thank you for your patience and understanding during this time, as we continue to complete these jobs.

## Vital support

We know that the crisis has hit lots of people hard, so we've adapted our services to make sure we are offering the help people need. We've expanded our Tenancy Support team, which has been working to provide crucial advice and information to anyone who is struggling financially.

We've also been working with local organisations such as Random Café and GoKula Vegetarian Café, providing spaces at our community hubs for them to open pop-up shops and takeaway services – so that those in need in our communities have ongoing access to food on a pay-what-you-can basis, in a safe and socially distanced setting.

Working alongside GoKula, we have also been able to provide vulnerable families with care packages made up of essentials to keep them going.

## Keeping in contact

Throughout the pandemic, we've been keeping customers informed of everything they need to know through our website and social media. On the 3<sup>rd</sup> June, we also held our first digital Tenant Question Time event, which centred around our response to the coronavirus crisis.

With our offices still closed and social distancing measures in place, we used Zoom video conferencing to share exactly how we have been continuing to respond to the ever-developing crisis and answer any questions customers had.

The session was managed by our Community Engagement team and attended by all the heads of our different services. Residents were able to join via their computers, tablets and smartphones, for what was a positive and productive meeting. We hope to host more virtual meetings like this in the future, as it gives people the chance to join in from the comfort of their home.



For all the latest information on our services during the coronavirus crisis, keep an eye on the FAQs on our website: [www.wcht.org.uk/coronavirus-customer-information/](http://www.wcht.org.uk/coronavirus-customer-information/)

# Do you need help with your money?

Our Tenancy Support team can help you to stay on top of your finances.

We know that money worries can be one of the biggest contributors to stress, particularly in times like these. With our dedicated team of knowledgeable and considerate Tenancy Support Officers on hand to provide free, honest and confidential support to all of our customers, we're here to help you feel better about your finances.

If you are feeling concerned and under pressure because of money worries, we can help. There is a range of options available that can help you keep up with rent payments and manage your finances, whatever your situation.

With current social distancing procedures in place, the team will be able to talk to you on the phone and discuss worries in a non-judgemental and safe environment.

Providing invaluable support reviews, our Tenancy Support Officers can make a huge difference. From carrying out benefit checks to make sure you are claiming all the benefits you should be receiving to providing foodbank vouchers, they can help you find ways to manage your money more effectively.

## Extra support during the pandemic

In response to the coronavirus crisis, we have set up a dedicated welfare fund which is available for particularly vulnerable families whose incomes have been affected by the pandemic. This fund can provide up to £100 to keep families supported during these difficult times.

Your Neighbourhood Officer or Tenancy Support Officer can recommend you for this support, so it's important you talk to us if you have any financial worries so that



we can support you properly and recommend you for funds such as these if you qualify.

One resident who has received assistance from our team explained what it was like to work with our Tenancy Support Officer: "They made me feel like a human, not looked down upon. He has been an extremely helpful person going through the transition from old benefits to Universal Credit. They listened, took on board my views and got me in contact with the correct people. I can't stress how grateful I am towards the team."

Whatever your situation, you are not on your own - we will be with you every step of the way. So why not reach out to the team today and see how we can help you?

**To get in touch with the team, call 0800 218 2247 or email [TSupport@wcht.org.uk](mailto:TSupport@wcht.org.uk)**

## Stay alert to scams

Would you be able to spot a scam? Since the coronavirus outbreak began, there has been an increase in scams that prey on people's heightened vulnerability during the crisis.

The scammers will often claim to be from trusted organisations such as the NHS or Hertfordshire County Council. Remember that even in difficult times like these, the NHS, the council and even your bank will never contact you out of the blue asking for personal or financial details.

Never share your personal or financial details when accepting calls from unknown and unverified numbers - and please remain vigilant when receiving communications of any kind from senders.

If you get a call such as this, where you are asked for personal or financial information, tell the caller to put their request in writing and hang up.

If you are unsure if a call from the council or your bank is genuine, you can always then contact them yourself using details that you know are genuine - either from the phonebook, from a bill or from their website.

Never use any contact details given to you by the caller, as you don't know if you will be connected to another fraudster.

For advice on scams and to speak with Trading Standards, please call the Citizens' Advice Consumer Helpline on 0808 223 1133.

To report fraud, please contact Action Fraud on 0300 123 2024.





## Never miss an issue!

Voice brings you all the latest news, information, advice and money-saving tips from Watford Community Housing.

To make sure you never miss an issue, let us know that you'd like to receive a regular copy by post. Call **0800 218 2247** or email [communications@wcht.org.uk](mailto:communications@wcht.org.uk).

You can also get monthly updates from Watford Community Housing via our digital newsletter! To stay in the loop, head to [www.wcht.org.uk](http://www.wcht.org.uk) to subscribe!

## Let's get digital!

Our online services are designed to make life easier for you!

From paying your rent to booking a repair or even reporting anti-social behaviour, managing your tenancy has never been easier!

Sign-up is simple and takes only a few minutes to complete – and from there paying rent and reporting issues can be done at the click of a button. With a digital account, your tenancy really is in your hands!

Sign up at [www.wcht.org.uk](http://www.wcht.org.uk)

# A home for a lifetime

We're changing our tenancies to give everyone the chance of a secure home for life.

**We all want to feel secure in a forever home that we can make our own. Following the hard work and feedback of our Gateway Membership Team, we are ensuring our customers feel safe and secure in their home by making lifetime assured tenancies our standard.**

The Gateway Membership Team is made up of tenants and individuals who are passionate about helping to improve services for residents.

In the case of new tenancies, the Gateway Membership Team expressed the view that making assured tenancies our standard would be in the best interests of customers. Over recent years, we have offered rolling fixed-term contracts lasting five years at a time before being renewed.

Our Group Board has agreed to the Gateway Membership Team's suggestion, so assured tenancies will now be offered as standard. This will mean that tenancies last a lifetime, avoiding the need for tenancy renewal and giving customers greater security and certainty about their future. It also means that you can remain a Watford Community Housing customer for life, even if your needs change and you move to a different home.

The assured tenancy will apply to every Watford Community Housing customer, aside from those who are in rent arrears. New customers will have a one-year starter tenancy, after which they will move to the lifetime tenancy.

This will have a positive impact on around 400 households on fixed-term tenancies who would have had a tenancy review over the next five years and also around 250 households who are currently in their starter tenancy period.

We are pleased to be able to offer this new standard, ensuring the security of our customers' homes and helping people to feel safe and settled for a lifetime.



## Retaining our top ratings!

We recently got the results of our assessment by the Regulator of Social Housing.

**We are pleased to confirm that we have retained both our V1 rating for financial viability and our G1 rating for governance, following our in-depth assessment (IDA) by the government's Regulator of Social Housing.**

These are the highest ratings available, which demonstrate that we are considered to be financially secure and well-governed.

The in-depth assessment was carried out at the end of April and looked at how we are run and governed, to ensure that we are compliant with relevant legislation and deliver value for money for our customers.

# Our survey says...

We're changing how we send out surveys to make it even easier for you to tell us what you think.

Your feedback is really important to us – it helps us to shape our services to better meet your needs. Working with Feefo, the popular automated customer feedback platform, we are streamlining our surveys to give a quicker, simpler and more transparent service.

From now on, after we've completed a repair in your home, we'll send you an email or text message with a link to Feefo's website, where you'll be able to let us know how we did.

This will replace paper surveys, reducing waste and saving you a trip to the postbox! It will also mean that we can respond more quickly to your feedback by taking care of any issues and tailoring our services to make them better.

We have also refined our surveys to make the whole process much quicker, asking fewer questions and making them more specific so they are easier to answer.



Using Feefo, you will also have the ability to opt out of surveys if you would prefer not to receive them. And to help us make sure we don't send you repeat requests to fill in surveys, this system can recognise when we have already asked you for your feedback.

You'll be able to give us your opinions through your phone or laptop – all you need is access to the internet to get started. But don't worry if you aren't confident online or don't have access to the internet – you can still share your views with us in the traditional way, by calling us on **0800 218 2247!**

## Join our scrutiny panel!

Could you help us to improve our services?

We're committed to making sure our services meet your expectations. That's why we have a dedicated scrutiny panel that carries out regular reviews to make sure we are meeting your needs. Over the last few years, they've helped us to look at how we welcome new customers through our lettings service and how we manage our estates and neighbourhoods.

The panel is made up of Watford Community Housing customers who want to help us keep improving, and they recently took part in a webinar organised by TPAS – the tenant engagement specialist.

The session offered the panel advice, including the top 10 tips for carrying out scrutiny reviews, to help the people on

the panel offer the maximum benefit for residents. We were pleased to hear that we are already meeting most, if not all, of the recommended standards!

We are always on the lookout for more of our customers to join our scrutiny panel, to ensure we are inclusive and provide an opportunity for everyone to contribute.

### Get involved!

If you want to get involved, we want to hear from you – especially if you are good at focusing on the bigger picture rather than individual issues.

To find out more about joining our scrutiny panel or providing it with feedback, email [community@wcht.org.uk](mailto:community@wcht.org.uk).

## Are you water-wise?

May was the driest month on record for England and we had the sunniest spring since records began in 1929. Since then we've continued to have unusually warm weather for much of 2020.

This has led to a shortage of water in the south-east over the last few months, which you may have noticed in the form of lower water pressure from your taps.

Affinity Water has put plans in place to prepare for hot weather throughout the summer. These include:

- **Improving its network.** Driving leakage down, meaning that there's more water in the network and available for customers.
- **Putting an additional 108 million litres** of water a day into the network of pipes – the equivalent of supplying an extra 400,000 customers.
- **Building up capacity** in water storage reservoirs.
- **Adjusting the network** to bring in water from other areas and get water to where it's needed most.
- **Improving contact** with customers in areas with pressure issues, informing them of the situation in their area.





## Stay fire-safe this summer!

With sunny weather and more time at home this summer, a barbecue can be a perfect way to unwind with your family or friends – but only if you make sure you stay safe.

Barbecues are the cause of lots of fires during the summer, so follow these top tips while you grill to keep you safe.

- **Never use a barbecue indoors, or on a balcony or roof terrace.** This includes any products that are sold as ‘balcony BBQs’ – these are against the rules for your block and present a serious fire risk to you and your neighbours.
- **Only barbecue in a large outdoor space where barbecuing is permitted** – away from anything that may catch fire, such as trees, fences, rubbish etc.
- **Keep a bucket of water, sand or a garden hose nearby** – because barbecues can easily get out of control.
- **Never use petrol or paraffin on a barbecue.** You should use only lighters or starter fuels on cold coals.
- **When you’re done, let your ashes cool for at least 48 hours** – then empty them onto bare garden soil, not into bins.
- **To keep people safe from Covid-19, respect social distancing rules.**

# Helping communities during the crisis

We’re committed to supporting our communities, so during the coronavirus crisis we’ve been doing even more to help local projects and people in need.

**Our Community Engagement team work tirelessly in our neighbourhoods to bring communities together. They also provide practical support and opportunities for our customers to engage with us and other community groups.**

In response to the coronavirus pandemic, we reshaped our Community Development Fund to provide specific support to small charities and organisations in the voluntary sector that are providing assistance to the local community during these tough times.

This fund can support large-scale projects or events which help develop our communities. In light of the current crisis, we want to support the efforts of the wonderful organisations who can continue to provide invaluable assistance to our communities and those most in need.

Delivering these services is particularly challenging under social distancing rules and the government’s changing guidelines, so we’ve offered our backing to help ensure these services can continue through it all. Community organisations and local charities are able to apply to us for financial support – so if that’s you, please get in touch!

Our Community Engagement Manager, Edel Maher, said: “The residents of Watford have reached out to family, friends, neighbours and even strangers, and we applaud you for all your help and support. We are proud to launch this new phase in our Community Development Fund and we hope that the camaraderie in our wonderful community continues through every challenge and opportunity that we face.”



## On the right track

We’re rolling out a new repairs tracking service to make life easier for you.

**We know that nobody enjoys waiting around, so we’re improving our repairs service so that you’ll be able to see exactly how close our repairs operative is!**

With our new digital repairs tracking service, you’ll receive an email or text message with a link that will allow you to see how many jobs the operative has before yours. This will update in real-time to give you a better idea of how long they’ll be. You’ll also be able to see their vehicle on a map and track them all the way to your home!

Keep your eyes peeled for this exciting new feature, making its way to your screens later this year!

# Our AGM – what you need to know

Our annual general meeting (AGM) will take place in September, so here's all the information you need if you're a Watford Community Housing member.

The AGM will be held on Monday 14<sup>th</sup> September. As always, we're keen for as many of our members to be involved in the meeting as possible – but because of the coronavirus crisis it will be a bit different this year. To make sure we can keep people safe and respect social distancing, we will be taking advantage of the additional flexibility offered by the government to hold a 'virtual AGM'.

This will mean that members can join the meeting from the comfort of home using their smartphone, tablet or computer. By using video conferencing to hold a virtual AGM, we can guarantee that we'll be able to go ahead even if restrictions around social distancing and group gatherings are still in place.

## How do I join the virtual AGM?

We will be sending information packs to all members in August. The pack will include instructions on how to log in and join the virtual AGM. It will also include information on how to cast proxy votes if you are unable to join the meeting.

If we have your email address, we'll send your information pack by email – so keep an eye on your inbox! The email will include a link to the full information pack and you will be able to cast proxy votes online too.

If we don't have your email address, your AGM information pack will arrive in the post.

## Why are information packs being emailed?

We usually send out a full information pack in the post to every Watford Community Housing member. However, we know that these days, more and more people like to do things online and avoid wasting paper.

We're also committed to delivering value for money for all of our customers. Every year it costs around £10,000 to post the paperwork to all of our members, so by



sending this information by email we can save money and make sure that more of your rent money goes directly towards better services and improvements to customers' homes.

## What will be discussed at the AGM?

The AGM will include a report from the Chair of our Board on how we've performed over the last year. Members will then be invited to vote on a series of motions, such as approving our financial statements for 2019/20.

This year, there is just one proposed change to the rules that govern how we operate, which members will vote on. We are able to hold a virtual AGM this year because of temporary changes the government has made in response to the coronavirus crisis, but because this will make it easier for more people to get involved we want to amend our rules so that we have this option for future years too (including where social distancing might still be in place).

This would allow more members to join meetings, making it easier for residents to have their say on our future and how we are run. The proposed change has the full support of our Gateway Membership Team, which represents residents.

**Please remember to keep an eye on your email inbox or the post for your AGM information pack in August – we hope you can join us for the meeting!**

*If you're looking for good food on a budget, look no further! Check out these great organisations that can help you eat healthily for less...*

## Random Café

If you're in real need of some essentials, you can head to the Random Café pop-up at our Leavesden Green Community Hub. They're at the hub every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday morning, from 10am to 12pm, or every Saturday afternoon from 1pm to 3pm.

It's a pay-what-you-can service and provides an ever-changing selection of essentials to keep you and your family fed during the pandemic.

**For the latest information on their services, you can find them on Facebook by searching for 'random cafe - sustainable watford'.**

## GoKula Vegetarian Café

You can find the free, delicious and nutritious meals that GoKula are known for from 12pm until 3pm every Tuesday at the Holywell Community Centre.

If you're in real need of help, you can bring your own bag and fill up on balanced meals and necessities for your family on a takeaway basis.

**You can find out the latest from GoKula on Facebook by searching for 'GoKula Vegetarian Cafe'.**



## The latest news from the Gateway Membership Team – which represents you.

# How we put residents at the heart of our work

**Did you know that Watford Community Housing is a special type of housing association that gives residents the chance to have more of a say over what we do?**

We are one of just five community gateway housing associations in England, which gives you the opportunity to get more involved in the decisions we make about homes and services. Under the community gateway model, people from the communities we serve can choose to become a Watford Community Housing member, giving them the chance to influence major decisions about our future.

You can become a full member if you are a tenant and there's also an associate member option for non-tenants from our communities. Members vote on key decisions, such as any changes to the rules that govern how we operate, giving them a real say in how we are run. These changes are usually put forward at our annual general meeting, which takes place every September.

### Giving you a voice

We also give residents opportunities to get directly involved with our work, to help us improve communities and deliver better services. Whatever skills you have, and whether you have plenty of time to spare or just an hour here and there, we'll find something to suit you. There are lots of different options, which are set out in our Involvement Menu. For example, you could help us to review funding bids from community groups, join one of our scrutiny panels to help improve our services, or apply to join the Gateway Membership Team.

Made up of residents from our communities, the Gateway Membership Team are your representatives within Watford Community Housing. The team meets regularly and works with us to help set our priorities and influence our decisions, putting residents at the heart of what we do.

### Join the team!

If you are business-minded or just want to champion your community, why not put yourself forward to join the Gateway Membership Team? And that's not the only reason to get involved...

**Develop your career** – if you've got passion, drive or ideas going to waste, we want to hear from you. Give us just a few hours of your time each month to help us to be the best we can be and we promise to return the favour!

**Improve your CV** – learn a range of new business skills or brush up on some old ones! You could gain crucial skills in management, communication, IT, finance and customer service to give your CV a boost or help you get back into work or training.

**Gain business experience** – help to shape a multi-million-pound business that's uniquely set up to give you a real say in what we do and how we do it. If you want to, you can work towards becoming a tenant Board member, shaping conversations at the highest level alongside our talented and experienced Group Board, which is made up of individuals from different backgrounds and industries.

**Make your voice heard** – have your say about how your home is managed and the services you receive. Use your skills to champion great services in one of our focus areas, such as digital services, estates, acting on customer feedback or helping us to be more environmentally friendly.

**Strengthen your community** – change lives by helping your community to connect and flourish.

**Make a difference** – we've got a generous Welfare Fund for people who need extra support, especially those affected by the coronavirus crisis, and you can make sure

that financial help goes to the people who need it most.

**Champion diversity** – we're committed to promoting equality and diversity in our communities. How about working with us as a diversity champion to make a positive to difference to people's lives?

If you want to join the Gateway Membership Team, we'll give you all the help you need to make it work. We will provide you with a laptop computer and give you training in how to use it, and we can support you with expenses including internet costs and childcare too.

### Ready to get involved?

Email us at [community@wcht.org.uk](mailto:community@wcht.org.uk) or check out our involvement menu at [www.wcht.org.uk/get-involved/](http://www.wcht.org.uk/get-involved/)

