

Winter 2020/21

voice

Informative news and advice from Watford Community Housing

- Supporting you through the pandemic
- Let's Go - our plans for the future
- Our commitment to equality
- Development updates
- And more!



watford
community
housing

Supporting you and your community through Covid

We've been offering a range of additional help and support for our customers and communities during the coronavirus pandemic.

Throughout the pandemic, we've continually planned for the months ahead, so we have a clear idea of what any further changes from the government would mean in terms of how we deliver our services and support you. By planning ahead in this way, we managed to maintain the vast majority of our services through November's national lockdown, including routine repairs.

We have also continued to work very closely with all our local authority partners, including Watford Borough Council, to make sure that our plans align with theirs and we can respond to any steps that local authorities may take to control the spread of the virus.

We want to be able to do as much for our customers as we can safely do, and by continuing to work closely with your local authority we'll be able to monitor and adapt our services appropriately, using the information they provide to make sure we continue to keep people safe.

Putting safety first

To help keep you and our staff safe, we ask that you observe social distancing should any members of our team be booked to visit your home. All our staff wear protective equipment and practise increased hygiene and social distancing, and we ask that you do the same – always keeping two metres apart and allowing our staff safe space to complete their work.

If you would like to find out more about how our services are working with the restrictions currently in place, take a look at the FAQs on our website at www.wcht.org.uk/covid-19

Your annual gas safety check

Every year, we carry out a gas safety inspection to make sure your home is safe. Despite the pandemic, these gas servicing and safety checks are continuing as usual, in line with advice from the government, Gas Safe and the Regulator of Social Housing.

Our engineers are taking all the measures necessary to ensure both your safety and their own whilst in your home. These include increased sanitisation of any surfaces they touch and the use of face masks and shields.

These annual gas safety checks allow us to ensure your home is safe and performing at its best for you. Your annual gas inspections are a legal requirement, so if you have one booked you will need to give us access, in line with your tenancy agreement.

To avoid a cancellation fee, you must allow our operatives access – ensuring you keep two metres away whilst this work is carried out, to allow our operatives to complete their checks as quickly as possible.

We are here to help if you have any concerns before our visit, whether they're about gas servicing or something else, so please get in touch with us.



Subway on Kings Street donated 15 sandwich vouchers for Watford Community Housing customers!



Our staff donated household necessities for people in need.

Stay safe this winter

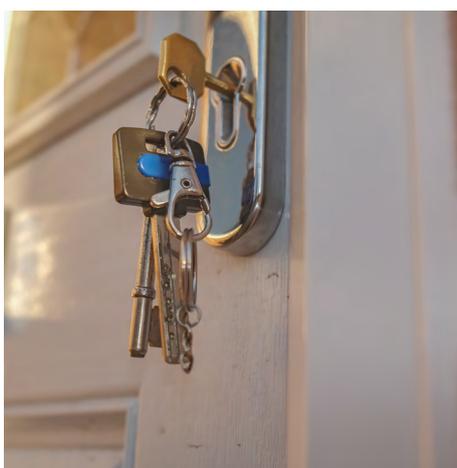
Here are some top tips to help you stay safe and secure in your home.

It's no secret that there are more burglaries in the darker winter months than during the summer. Hertfordshire Constabulary has put together a list of tips to keep your home safe and to help keep burglars at bay.

- Use timer switches on a lamp, radio or TV set so that they turn on as it gets dark in the afternoons.
- Make a habit of checking that ground floor windows and doors are closed and locked when you leave the house or go to bed. Upstairs windows should be locked when the house is unoccupied.
- PVCu doors usually have multi-locking systems – lock them by lifting the handle and turning the key to keep your home secure.
- Car and house keys should be kept out of sight in a safe place. Don't leave them on display on window sills, or in porches, hallways or kitchens.

- Secure your rear garden by shutting and locking any gates. Burglars can use garden tools or ladders to break in, so make sure you securely lock away any tools after use.

For more advice and tips, check out the Herts Constabulary website at www.herts.police.uk – and remember that in an emergency you should call 999!



Have your finances been hit by Covid?

We know that the pandemic has affected people in lots of different ways – and for some it has meant extra money worries. Our dedicated team of knowledgeable and considerate Tenancy Support Officers are on hand to provide free, honest and confidential money advice to all our customers at this time of uncertainty.

There is a range of options available that can help you keep up with rent payments and manage your finances, whatever your situation. The team will be available to talk with you on the phone and discuss worries in a non-judgmental 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 improve your situation and help you manage your finances.

Whatever your situation, you are not on your own – our Tenancy Support Officers will be with you every step of the way.

Call 0800 218 2247 or email TSupport@wcht.org.uk

[Or click here to learn more about our Tenancy Support service!](#)



Our plans for the future – Let's go!

This autumn, we launched our new business plan for 2020-2025. Working in partnership to transform our communities and change lives for the better, we plan to do even more over the next five years to support you!

We have three interlinking priorities, which will shape how we work and deliver on our promises. These include equipping ourselves with the right resources, focusing on innovative development and dynamic partnerships, and – most importantly – our Customer Promise.

Our Customer Promise sits at the heart of our business plan and sets out our five service priorities for the next five years. It was created in consultation with residents, so it reflects what matters most to you.

Find out more on our website at www.wcht.org.uk/letsgo

Helping residents stay warm in winter

Our Community Engagement team recently received 130 'Warm in Winter' bags from Small Acts of Kindness – an organisation we work closely with who are dedicated to supporting isolated older people in Hertfordshire.

These 'Warm in Winter' bags contain essential practical items to help keep older people warm, including a fleece blanket, thermal hat, gloves, socks and leg warmers, a mug and hot drinks.

In total, since Small Acts of Kindness first began in 2014, they have reached over 26,000 older people who struggle to keep warm in their homes during the winter months – some even faced with the impossible choice between heating their homes and buying food.

The bags also contain a comprehensive Purple Pages information pack that signposts them to relevant activities and services for older people, helping to combat loneliness and isolation.

These bags have been delivered to our independent living facilities, so that our older and more vulnerable customers benefit from these warming essentials.



Our commitment to equality and inclusion

We're dedicated to ensuring that our communities are fair and equal for all, and that the way we work reflects the diversity in these communities.



Equality, diversity and inclusion are hugely important to us. We recently relaunched our commitment to supporting, reflecting and championing our communities and the array of cultures, races and identities that live in them.

Our Equality, Diversity & Inclusion (ED&I) group focused on Black History Month in October, with the team organising a guest speaker – activist, journalist, film-maker and author Marc Wadsworth.

This hour-long session gave insights into areas of Black British history that Marc has spent his career documenting through books and films such as 'Divided By Race, United in War and Peace'. This feature-length documentary is about Caribbean and English Second World War veterans and race relations during and after the war.

Marc is passionate about sharing the stories and journeys of people of colour in Britain. These were at the heart of this discussion, which focused on how discovering the untold stories and experiences of those around us can help us become stronger allies to one another.

The talk closed with a Q&A session – with some important and insightful questions

touching on issues such as how staff members can help Watford Community Housing to become a more inclusive and diverse organisation, understanding the difficulties that different cultures and races can face in accessing housing, and how we can learn to better support one another.

Around 30 members of staff joined this important discussion and provided some wonderfully positive and empowering feedback.

Mary Swaine, our Governance & Regulation Manager, said: "I thoroughly enjoyed our session with Marc – he spoke so personally and insightfully about his work as a film-maker and journalist and really understood the issues minority communities face. He clearly supported us in our efforts to be a genuinely inclusive landlord and employer and, I think, motivated us all to keep up the great work we've started on this."

With speaker sessions like this providing a space to learn and talk openly with guests outside of the organisation, our ED&I group hope to build a more diverse and inclusive organisation, where experiences and opportunities can be shared equally.

Taking action on anti-social behaviour

Working with the police, we recently obtained a closure order to stop drug use and potential dealing.

In partnership with Herts Police, our anti-social behaviour (ASB) team has enacted a closure order on a property in Woodmere Avenue in order to safeguard local residents.

Heather Burns, our Neighbourhood Services Team Leader, who oversees the Anti-Social Behaviour Team, worked closely with officers from Herts Police to build a case against the resident after receiving reports of drug use and possible drug dealing. Neighbours were contacted for statements in order to make sure the case for the closure order was accurate and robust.

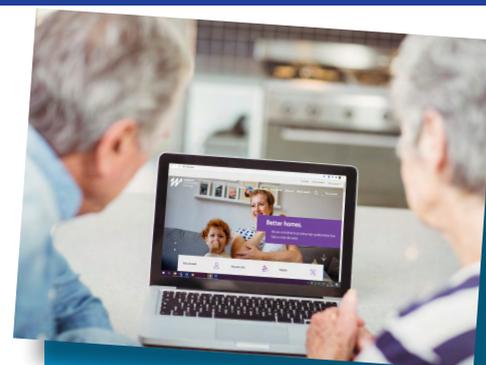
Representatives from both Herts Police and Watford Community Housing initially attended court on 30th September, but the case was adjourned until 6th October, when a three-month closure order was granted. This means that no one is allowed to enter the property for three months.

Heather said: "The safety and wellbeing of our customers is our highest priority and we're committed to working in partnership with local organisations to make sure our communities are safe and welcoming places to live. We are really happy to have been able to obtain this closure order and

we will now be looking to gain a notice of seeking possession, which will mean that the resident in question will not be able to return to the property. I'd like to thank the officers from Watford police station who were instrumental in helping us protect our customers, as well as the local residents who came forward to speak to us."

Sergeant Luke Mitchell, from the Watford Community Safety Unit, said: "Working in partnership with Watford Community Housing, we were able to attend St. Albans Magistrates' Court and obtain this closure order for a period of three months. This address has caused nuisance and annoyance for nearby residents for a long time, but by being proactive we were able to secure a large amount of evidence which supported the closure of this address."

We take anti-social behaviour very seriously. If you are experiencing anti-social behaviour, or see anything that causes concern, you can contact the team by calling 0800 218 2247 or emailing ASB@wcht.org.uk. You can also call the police on the non-emergency number 101, although if you are in immediate danger you should always call 999.



Free WiFi for Tree Bridge!

As we continue our commitment to improve our Independent Living offering, we are aiming to roll out free WiFi across each of the schemes in the coming months.

The first scheme to receive this addition was Tree Bridge House, where residents can now access and utilise the fantastic free WiFi throughout the building. The scheme will also receive a brand-new information screen very soon, to keep residents up to date with our latest news and any scheme announcements.

With these improvements, the schemes will also receive improved CCTV, to ensure increased security for our residents and to allow us to tackle any anti-social behaviour more easily.



Fire safety audit success for tower blocks

Our Abbey View and Munden View tower blocks have been successfully audited for fire safety by Hertfordshire Fire and Rescue - following our investment of more than £1.5 million into the buildings.

To ensure that residents are as safe as possible, we've fitted brand new sprinkler systems and multi-sensor fire alarms at the blocks in the Meriden, Garston.

Over the past few years, the government has outlined a number of recommendations around fire safety for high-occupancy buildings over 18 metres high.

Hertfordshire Fire and Rescue chose us to be the subject of its first safety audit in line with the government's guidance. Thanks to all the work that has been done to enhance these buildings, both Abbey View and Munden View passed the audit with flying colours.

This is a fantastic result, following the hard work that went into enhancing the fire safety in our tallest buildings.

[If you'd like to find out more about how we keep your home fire safe, take a look here!](#)

Essential goods for residents

This autumn we received some incredibly generous donations from Goods for Good – an organisation with a mission in helping vulnerable people in urgent need by delivering a lifeline of essential goods and restoring dignity.

Goods for Good source overstocked essential items which may otherwise end up in landfill and deliver or donate these items to those most in need, wherever they may be in the world. Over the last four years they have delivered humanitarian aid worth over £16 million, that saved 1,300 tonnes from landfill and supported two million people in need.

Rosalind Bluestone, the founder and CEO of the charity very kindly reached out to us and donated bedding from Ikea to our customers most in need, along with a bundle of babies' nappies and toys that proved to be a great help to families in temporary accommodation.

Goods for Good are moving to Watford at the end of the month and we, along with Rosalind, are looking forward to working together more in the future to help our residents.

Independent living team given top rating

Watford Community Housing has been accredited as an 'Outstanding Provider' of services for older people.



Our Independent Living services were recently assessed by Erosh, a national network for older people's housing, and awarded a three-star 'Outstanding Provider' rating – the highest rating available! Erosh recognised our team's hard work, professionalism and commitment to providing high-quality services for older people.

Here's what the rating means according to Erosh: "The service is performing exceptionally well, securing and learning from both staff and customer feedback and experience to shape the service and support customers to achieve positive outcomes. Whilst services are outstanding there remains a drive for continuous improvement and sector leadership."

Our Independent Living team wanted to achieve this extra accreditation to ensure our services were appropriately scrutinised and we could be held accountable to improve upon any areas that may have needed it. Residents and members of the Gateway Membership Team were involved with the review process, giving their views and sharing a wealth of insights and experiences to help Erosh assess our services.

Lynn Wheeler, Senior Scheme Officer explained: "This 'Outstanding Provider' accreditation will act as a benchmark, as we commit ourselves to maintaining these high standards and continuing to strive for excellence within our independent living schemes and beyond."

Welcoming new residents to Bushey Hall Road

Our Salisbury Square development on Bushey Hall Road in Hertsmere is now ready for people to start moving in.

Work started on the project in the winter of 2018, to deliver 25 modern one- and two-bedroom homes across two blocks, with a mix of private sale, shared ownership and affordable rent homes on offer.

We recently took handover of Bushey Hall Road with these beautiful new flats now ready to become homes.



A new home for Random Café

We have worked closely with Random Café throughout the pandemic – and now we’ve helped them find a new home at Meriden Community Gardens.

Random Café is a volunteer-led organisation dedicated to saving food waste and bringing essential items to those in need. It allows customers to buy essentials on a pay-as-you-feel basis, to ensure that nobody goes hungry.

We’ve helped Random Café to keep operating despite the coronavirus pandemic, as the café has utilised our community hubs to hold pop-up shops.



It has also been on the lookout for a more permanent home and we’ve now been able to make this a reality too, by offering the Meriden Community Gardens at a very low rent. Together, we hope this will revitalise the garden as an outdoor space at the heart of the community.

Julie Dare, our Senior Hubs and Facilities Officer, said: “We are so happy to be working with The Random Café and we can’t wait to see The Meriden Garden become the fully inclusive community space we know it can be.

“They have such an exciting project with a strong focus on sustainability as well as offering something truly needed in the area with their pay as you can ethos in their pop-up shop and future café. The Random Café are fully committed to helping the site achieve its full potential and we cannot wait

to see the changes as they progress.”

Jane Johnson, founder and owner of Random Café, said: “We had been looking for a full-time permanent home for three years and we’ve finally found one here at the Meriden Garden thanks to Watford Community Housing.

“Although the gardens are in need of some love, we’ve already secured the support of a local construction company to lay the foundations and build the basic shell of a building and hope we can have the support of local tradespeople, suppliers, our supporters and volunteers in donating their time and skills to this great cause and help us complete the build.”

[You can find out more about Random Café’s plans, donate and see how their fundraising is going right here.](#)

It’s as easy as ABC!

Our funding has helped to make a boxing gym a reality.

Our Community Engagement team recently attended the opening of the new premises of West Herts ABC (Amateur Boxing Club), which we helped fund through our Community Development initiative.

Saud Hafiz, founder of West Herts ABC, approached us with an in-depth application for our Community Development Fund – dedicated to providing funding to local organisations that can help enrich and support our local communities.

As a qualified England Boxing Coach, Saud and West Herts ABC are fully affiliated and the team have extensive experience in raising aspirations of young people and championing our local community – so the funding panel happily approved full funding.

Our support has provided a rubber crumb flooring throughout the club building, providing a safe environment for users

to train. Funding has also gone towards essential fittings which include the boxing ring frame, beam work fittings for 13 punch bags and finally, for Covid safety, there are four hand sanitiser fixings and plumbing for three hand wash units now installed too.

A safe space to learn life skills

Using boxing as a healthier outlet from the trouble he could have found himself in as a young man, Saud found a great mentor who guided him, helping him go on to fight at county level. Now, he is bringing his experience full circle, ensuring Watford ABC allows other kids to have the opportunity to channel their energy in a healthy way, where they can learn discipline and respect for others.

The boxing club welcomes people of any age and ability, and aims to champion our community by bringing together people from different backgrounds.



It’s clear that Saud and the club are incredibly passionate about helping others, and with this passion, they will ensure that the club can be a real asset to the community by working with the Community Support Safety team at Watford Borough Council, the Police and recently partnering with the Watford Youth Strategy Group on behalf of YC Hertfordshire.

We welcome residents to our 500th new home!



We celebrated the completion of our 500th newly built home, with the landmark being reached at Fairways Farm, Bucknalls Avenue in Three Rivers.

Developed by Inland Homes, Fairways Farm comprises 100 new homes for mixed tenure. The shared ownership properties include a four-bed house and 11 one-bed and two-bed flats, as well as 15 houses and 18 flats for affordable rent.

Our first project with Inland Homes has been completed despite the challenges of the coronavirus crisis, which meant that the site had to be shut down temporarily. However, strong teamwork ensured that work resumed and residents were able to start settling into their new homes as quickly and smoothly as possible.

A monumental welcome home

In August, we welcomed the occupants of our 500th newly built home – Louis, Cora and their children, Mason and Edan.

Louis explained: “We spotted the house on the bidding list and we thought it looked beautiful. We were delighted when we were told we’d got it. We drove down here quite a lot to see it being built.

“We love that it feels a bit like a rustic cottage, with little touches like the green windows – they’re fantastic. The quality is amazing and there are some really nice touches like the external lights, the numbers and the outside tap.

“It’s perfect for us. We spent nine-and-a-half years in a one-bedroom flat with Mason, so now he’s got his own room for the first time. It was fantastic to come in and get it all how we want it. We could never consider buying our previous flat because it was too small for us.”

Cora added: “It’s been nice to have a blank canvas. It gives us a lot more space and it’s lovely. There’s just the right amount of houses for a community and we’ve got the park too, which is great. We’re really happy – we pinch ourselves every evening when we sit here, because it feels like it’s a holiday home and someone’s going to come and tell us we have to leave!”

Tina Barnard, our Chief Executive said: “We are delighted to welcome Louis, Cora and

their family into their new home. This beautiful development has provided homes for shared ownership and affordable rent, to ensure people have the chance to live comfortably and happily in a home they can afford.

“We’re really proud to have achieved the landmark of our building our 500th new home. Our commitment to delivering high-quality homes and friendlier communities is at the heart of each of our developments and we look forward to bringing more much-needed affordable housing to South-West Hertfordshire.”

Delivering great affordable homes

Since being established in 2007, we have been committed to providing high-quality affordable homes in Watford and beyond.

Our first newly developed homes were built in Alma Place, which was initially a pocket garage site sat within the Meriden, Garston. This project was completed in early 2011 and provided six houses – 4 two-bedroom terraces and 2 three-bedroom semi-detached homes for social rent. The site also included the refurbishment of 12 existing garages at the time.

Since then, we have gone on to deliver a range of projects, providing modern affordable housing to suit a variety of needs, alongside important and much-needed community spaces.

More recently, these have included larger schemes such as the redevelopment of The Brow, while works are ongoing at the Meriden on a regeneration scheme that will provide 133 new homes, including a flexicare facility for older people, a brand new parade of shops and new green spaces. We have also expanded into new areas such as Hertsmere and Dacorum, to provide affordable homes further afield.

