

Autumn/Winter 2024

voice

Informative news and advice from Watford Community Housing

Special
edition -
how we can
support
you this
winter!

- We're here for you this winter – see *pages 1-2*
- Making neighbourhoods cleaner and greener
- How your GMT has been working for you
- Helping our customers to be better off
- And more!



watford
community
housing

Supporting our residents this winter

Welcome to our special edition of voice! This issue includes all the information you need about how we can support you as we head into winter.

Understanding the Winter Fuel Payment

We're aware that some residents may be affected by changes to the Winter Fuel Payment. It doesn't affect everyone over state pension age so please make sure you understand the changes and receive the benefits you're entitled to.

The Winter Fuel Payment is a yearly payment to help people cover their bills over the winter. Until recently, the payment went to all UK households with someone over state pension age. Now it will only go to households who also receive Pension Credit or another means-tested benefit, although you will not be eligible if you only receive Housing Benefit.

There are an estimated 1,000 people in Watford who have not yet claimed the Pension Credit that they are entitled to.

Pension credit can be backdated for up to three months. The deadline to apply for Pension Credit and still receive the winter fuel payment is 21 December.

Don't miss out – speak to our Financial Inclusion team today about what benefits you may be eligible for.

Call us on **0800 218 2247** or email enquiries@wcht.org.uk

You can also contact Citizens Advice for independent guidance – call **0800 144 8848** or visit citizensadvice.org.uk



Top tip: contacting your energy provider for more support with fuel payments

Tony, a member of our Gateway Membership Team, reached out to his utility provider and managed to save £100 on his energy bills! Here's what Tony said:



"My pension income is roughly £20 per week above the pension credit threshold, so when the changes to the winter fuel allowance were announced, I knew I'd miss out.

"A few days later, my energy provider sent me an email about a scheme that provides pensioners with up to £200 towards their winter fuel bills. I applied immediately and after just two days I received a credit of £100 which was credited into my energy account straight away.

"I then learnt that most energy providers have similar schemes and I would strongly urge all pensioners in similar circumstances to me to apply as soon as possible."

Need help filling out the form? Contact our Financial Inclusion team for help.

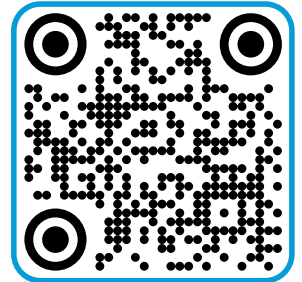
What to do if you have damp or mould



Problems with condensation, mould and damp can occur during the winter. We are committed to tackling any issues quickly and effectively, so if you have damp or mould in your home you should contact us straight away.

Tell us about the problem

Please provide as much detail as possible when reporting an issue – such as whether you or anyone in your home is vulnerable or has any health issues. If you can also send photos these will help us to diagnose and fix any problems more quickly.



We are here to offer help and guidance in resolving these problems and we will make sure that any serious issues are followed up and dealt with as soon as possible.

Find out more at www.wcht.org.uk/mould or scan the QR code.

Carrying out vital repairs

We know that there is always an increase in the number of repairs that are requested at this time of year. The winter weather can lead to more problems in the home, and we all tend to notice little jobs that need doing as we spend more time indoors during the colder months.

We are here to take care of any larger repairs for you – please bear in mind that it may just take us a little longer during the winter, as we have more jobs to deal with. In some situations, it can take up to five working days to complete repairs to heating and hot water systems, so please report any problems as quickly as possible so that we can get to work on them.

What to do if you have a repair outstanding

If you've reported a problem to us, please be assured that we know about it and we will carry out the works as soon as we can. You do not need to call us and you can check for updates through your online account – visit www.wcht.org.uk to log in now or to sign up for an account.

If you have repairs issues that you have not reported to us, please let us know. The easiest way to request repairs is through your online account. You can also report problems by calling **0800 218 2247** or emailing us at enquiries@wcht.org.uk.

For more information, go to www.wcht.org.uk/repairs

- Find out if your repair is covered by our service
- Check the current waiting times for different jobs
- Request a repair



Building new homes in St Albans

We're proud to introduce our latest development, Jubilee Square in St Albans – providing much-needed social and affordable rent homes in Hertfordshire.



In July we completed our latest development, Jubilee Square – which consists of 93 new homes – in the heart of St Albans.

Of the 93 properties, 33 are for social rent for those on St Albans City & District Council's housing register, and 60 are for shared ownership – giving people including key workers a more affordable option to own a home of their own in an iconic location.

Scan the QR code to learn more about our new homes at Jubilee Square.



Gaining the highest ratings

We have become one of the first housing associations to be awarded the new C1 rating for our commitment to providing excellent services to our customers.

Earlier this year, we were inspected by the Regulator of Social Housing. We are delighted to have been awarded the highest ratings across all three categories.

As well as retaining our G1 rating for governance and our V1 rating for viability, we have earned a C1 rating under the new consumer standards, which puts us amongst the best in the sector for the services we deliver to our customers.

We believe this grading reflects our commitment to providing great services and putting residents at the heart of our work.

Scan the QR to read what our Chief Executive, Tina Barnard had to say about the regulatory judgement.



Supporting local families with free school uniform

Thanks to local charity Goods for Good, we were able to provide free school uniform to families who need them, just in time for the new school term starting in September!

On 22 August, our Community team held a pop-up shop in our Leavesden Green Community Hub which gave local families the chance to pick up some unbranded school uniform, as well as hygiene products and stationery packs.



Welcoming our new residents

Hendon Christian Housing Association recently decided to transfer their housing stock to us, meaning their former customers now benefit from the great services we provide at Watford Community Housing.

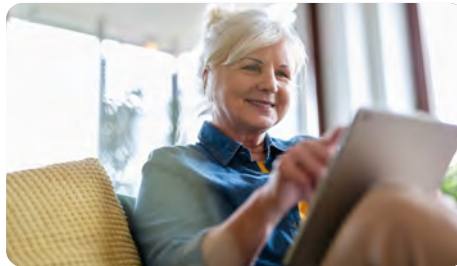
Earlier this year, we announced that West Herts Homes transferred its homes to Watford Community Housing, having chosen us as the preferred partner to deliver services to its customers. Following this, we have now taken over the management of some of Hertfordshire County Council's homes, as well as homes from Hendon Christian Housing Association (HCHA).

The transfer from Hertfordshire County Council took effect on 16 September and saw us take on around 200 supported housing bedspaces across Watford, Three Rivers, Dacorum, Hertsmeire, St Albans and Welwyn Hatfield.

On 31 October, HCHA, based in North London, transferred their 140 properties to

us following a consultation with residents. HCHA decided that merging with a larger landlord would be the best way to make sure its tenants continued to receive good-quality services.

A warm welcome to all our new customers – please get in touch with us if you have any queries or issues in your home, such as outstanding repairs or damp and mould.



A fairer approach to charges

Our repairs operatives' time is highly in demand, yet limited, and so our Gateway Membership Team (GMT) have worked closely with staff to identify ways the team can use their time more efficiently.

During a recent scrutiny session, the GMT identified that we were spending too much time and money on rechargeable repairs. These are repairs that residents are responsible for paying for, as they are a direct result of their actions. These include lost keys, blocked toilets, rubbish left in vacant homes and misusing our out-of-hours services.

To put that into perspective, we spend approximately £100,000 a year removing fly-tipping.

Our GMT have said that the updated Recharge Policy ensures that tenants who look after their homes and take pride in their neighbourhood are not required to share the cost of repairs for those who do not.

We have identified situations where people might be exempt from the repairs charges and have put together a fair appeals process for anyone who is concerned that the charges may have been applied unfairly.

To understand what repairs are your responsibility, and to read our updated Recharge Policy, scan the QR code.



Celebrating the LGBT+ community in Hertfordshire

On Saturday 31 August, Cassiobury Park became a sea of colour as it hosted the 11th annual Herts Pride.

Herts Pride is a safe, inclusive and fun day dedicated to supporting and celebrating the local LGBT+ community – and a great opportunity for us to speak to our residents about housing options, job opportunities and ways we can support you.

Scan the QR code to find out more.



You're invited to a Christmas carol service!

The Lighthouse Café is a joint project between All Saints Church Leavesden and Watford Community Housing, which was created as a way to build relationships within the local community. They run a weekly coffee morning and a very popular annual carol service.

Where?

Leavesden Green Community Hub, Clarke Green off Clarke Way, WD25 0BW

When?

19 December from 6.30pm

At the carol service you will hear a number of carols and readings by members of the community, including Kingsway Infants School singing Little Donkey – and there will be free refreshments.

Charles Porter, a Reader for All Saints Church, said: "I am extremely proud of how the carol service is so well supported. It gives me great pleasure to see the community coming together, breaking down barriers and enjoying the company of others. It brings out the good will of Christmas."

As a recognised 'Place of Welcome', people of any age, gender or religion are welcomed!

A link to book your free place will be shared on the All Saints Leavesden website.

Visit www.allsaintslife.com to find out more.



Raising money and supplies for foodbank

Our colleagues took part in World Food Day and raised money – as well as a huge amount of food – to donate to Watford Foodbank.



On 15 October, staff from Watford Community Housing marked World Food Day by sharing their favourite regional dishes, dressing in traditional clothing and donating to Watford Foodbank, helping to support those in need in the local area.

Our staff understand the privileged position they are in to be able to prepare

and share food with each other, so they decided to use this day as an opportunity to support local families who may be struggling at the moment.

This year, we are very proud to have raised an incredible £170 and delivered five crates and two huge bags of food – which came to 30kg! – to Watford Foodbank.

Fundraising for Macmillan Cancer Research

On 26 September, we held a Coffee Morning to raise money for Macmillan Cancer Research UK.

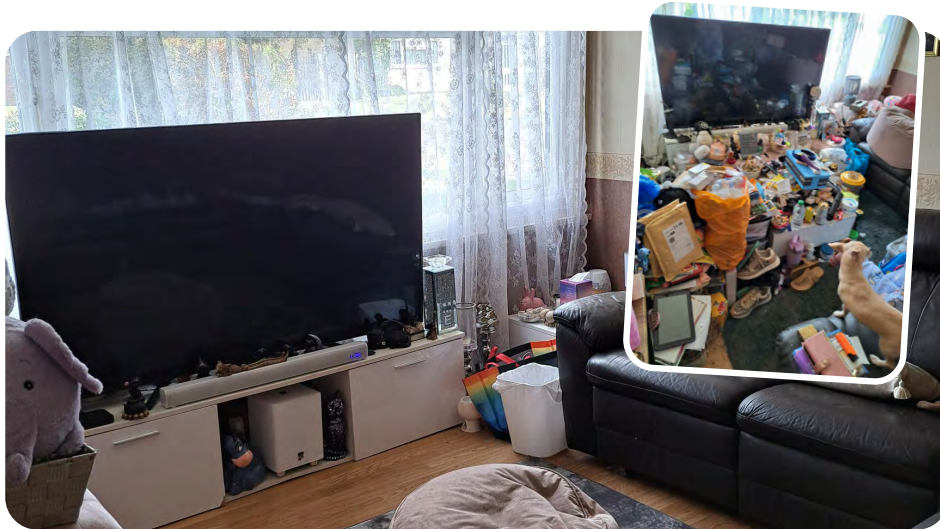
Due to some of our staff being brilliant bakers, and others eating lots of cake, we proudly raised over £250!

Donations like this mean that Macmillan can provide practical, emotional and financial support to people living with cancer when they need it.



A helping hand

Our Community Support Team are here to offer help and guidance to customers who may need a little extra support, and recently helped one person dealing with a complicated hoarding case.



Sometimes our residents may find themselves unable to look after their homes due to hoarding or other complex needs. Our Community Support Officer, Donna, works hard to support these residents to clear their homes and encourage them to keep it that way. Here is one of her recent successful cases.

“After months of trying to access the property, the tenant allowed me to visit her, along with Adult Services and Herts Fire and Rescue,” says Donna.

“Unfortunately, the tenant had recently lost both her son and daughter, and ended up isolating herself at home.

“After explaining the risks she was currently living in – including the risk of fire and of

attracting pests – she agreed to let us help clear and clean her home. The day of the clearance would have been her daughter’s birthday, so she saw this as a sign that it was the right time.

“The tenant was so happy with the support and now she feels like she has her life back. She has been able to have people visit her without feeling embarrassed.

“It’s great that we have finally been able to not only help the tenant to make her home safer, but also improve her wellbeing – thank you to this tenant for letting us share her story.”

If you or someone you know needs support with hoarding, please get in touch with us – we are here to support you.

Grab yourself a jacket potato!

Taking place at the Leavesden Green Community Hub is our free lunch club, or as the regulars call it, Jimmy’s Jackets!

Each Wednesday we host a free session for members of the community to get out of the house, meet up with their friends and have a delicious jacket potato.

Spaces are limited, so please book your place by emailing CommunityHubs@wcht.org.uk or calling 01923 679 664.



Are you hot on water hygiene?

Here are some of the key things you can do to keep your water safe and reduce the risk of Legionella:

- If you have a hot water storage cylinder, the thermostat should be set to 60°C
- You should regularly clean your taps, shower heads and hoses to prevent the build-up of limescale
- If you have any taps that don’t get used very often, make sure they are flushed through regularly to prevent limescale from building up, and if you have any unused taps, showers or any sections of water pipe that you don’t use, let us know so that we can remove these for you

For more advice on managing water in your home, take a look at our handbook by scanning the QR code.



Find out about estate services

Our new, easy-to-use toolkit can help you find out everything you need to know about our estate services.

- Find out how to join us on estate inspections or become a Neighbourhood Champion
- Give us feedback so we can keep improving our services
- Check when our cleaning and grounds maintenance contractors Accuro are in your area
- Find out how our Estates team can support you
- Learn how to report fly-tipping

Check out the toolkit by scanning the QR code:





‘Love your neighbourhood’ is our new campaign focused on working with our residents to create cleaner, greener neighbourhoods that we can all be proud of!

Introducing our all-new Neighbourhood Champions

As part of our ‘Love your neighbourhood’ campaign our Resident Inspectors are having a rebrand! Based on your feedback, they will now be known as Neighbourhood Champions as they continue working to help improve your area.



You may have heard us mention our team of Resident Inspectors before. They are a group of volunteers who rate the tidiness and cleanliness of their area once a month and feed that back to us so we can make improvements, if necessary.

Following resident feedback, our wonderful volunteers are now going to be known as Neighbourhood Champions! This new name better suits the role, as our volunteers are friendly and approachable, and are passionate about keeping their neighbourhoods clean and tidy.

Fancy becoming a Neighbourhood Champion?

Get in touch by emailing us at CustomerRelationsTeam@wcht.org.uk to find out more.

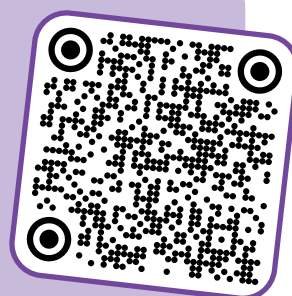


Swanston House gardens in bloom

The gardening club at Swanston House, one of our independent living schemes, was recently given over £450 from our Community Chest fund to spruce up the communal garden.

The club are hoping to make the garden a welcoming area for residents by adding plants, a barbecue, and improving the fence.

Do you have a local project in need of some funding? Scan the QR code to find out how we can support you.



Communal gardens at Lincoln Drive get a revamp!

Our temporary accommodation scheme has been given a new lease of life after some volunteers worked to upgrade the communal garden with some new flower beds, an attractive mural, and a general tidy up.



Due to some brilliant partnership work, the communal garden at our temporary accommodation scheme, Lincoln Drive, has been given a new lease of life.

Sotira Pamphile, Lettings Manager for Watford Community Housing, said: "By working together to upgrade the garden facilities we have been able to provide

those living in temporary accommodation with the opportunity to engage in a wide range of outdoor activities, such as gardening and creating a bug hotel.

"We believe that this will help to foster an improved sense of community for everyone at Lincoln Drive."



Get your green fingers ready - it's nearly gardening competition time!

We are running a gardening competition in 2025 - and we know a lot of you keen gardeners will want to get ahead of the game and start planning, so here are the key details.

There will be three categories, so everybody has the chance to get involved!

- Best-kept front garden
- Best-kept communal garden
- Best-kept floral display e.g. pots, baskets or balconies

On Tuesday 17 June 2025, judges will take a look at your entry - please note that you can submit more than one entry. We are very excited to announce that we will be joined by green flag judge Barry Joyce!

Winners will receive gardening vouchers up to the value of £50.

We will provide more details about how to enter the competition nearer the time, so watch this space.

Good luck!



Helping our customers to be better off financially

Our Financial Inclusion team are here to help customers maximise their money by helping them claim any benefits they may be entitled to, help them plan a budget, and more. Thanks to the team, our customers are better off by over £1 million.

We offer a free, confidential money advice service to all our customers – this includes working with you to make sure you receive all the benefits you are entitled to.

In the last 12 months, the support from our Financial Inclusion team means that 206 of our residents are financially better off!

This year, the amount that our customers are better off by adds up to £1,063,841.10 per year, which is the first time that we have surpassed a million pounds.

This figure includes over £444,000-worth of Housing Benefit and almost £300,000 in Universal Credit, as well as Pension Credit, Welfare Fund payments, and various other benefits.

Recently, a customer approached the

team at a cost-of-living event and explained that they currently receive no benefits. They have some health issues which may make them eligible for Attendance Allowance, and a benefit check identified that they may be entitled to Housing Benefit.

They were supported with both applications and were awarded higher rate Attendance Allowance of £108.55 per week and Housing Benefit of £31.18 per week. This means they are better off to the value of £7,343.33 per year.

We are very proud to have been able to support so many residents during these tough times. If you are having money worries, our Financial Inclusion team are here to help. **Please call 0800 218 2247.**



Need a little more support?

Our housing officers are here to support you with all sorts of things, and recently helped one resident move into a new home as their old one was no longer suitable.



Following a motorcycle accident, one of our tenants was left with painful injuries and was unable to go back to work. They also found it difficult to leave their home as there was no lift.

They felt like no one was listening to them until they got in contact with a member of our Housing team, who listened and did everything they could to help move them into a more suitable home.

We are pleased to say that the resident now has their own independent living home, with specific adaptations to suit

their needs, as well as on-site support from our scheme officers if they need it, and access to social activities in the communal lounge.

If you're in need of some extra support, you can get in touch with your housing officer by emailing housing@wcht.org.uk or by calling **0800 218 2247**.

Scan the QR code to find out who your Housing Officer is.



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

What do the GMT do?

The Gateway Membership Team (GMT) is a group of residents who work closely with us to help us keep improving and ensure we are delivering the best possible services for our customers.

By working closely with our Group Board and our leadership team, the GMT make sure that all of our customers have a real say in what we do, and they help us make the changes that are important to you.



Getting to know your team

Our Gateway Membership Team works for you, our customers. We caught up with a couple of the team's new members to learn more about why they joined.

At this year's annual general meeting, six new members were ratified into our Gateway Membership Team (GMT).

All our members are passionate about making a difference in their community and felt like joining the GMT would be a great way to make that happen. Here are two of our members, Kacper Flisiuk and Lynn Wheeler, talking about why they joined the GMT.



Kacper: "I joined because I could see that not many young people do this type of work anymore. I hope I can encourage those who would like to join but don't have the courage

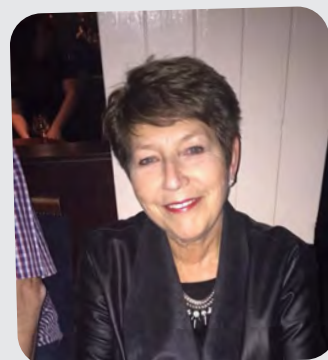
to do so. "If they see that there is someone around their age, that might give them a push. We are the future generation after all.

"I also joined because I want to help people. Not enough people have their voice heard so we are here to give them the microphone."

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Lynn: "I have been a tenant for over 30 years, first with Watford Council and then with the transfer to Watford Community Housing. I was very interested in the Community Gateway ethos and encouraged tenants living within my neighbourhood of the benefits of the transfer.

"I was a member of the Housing team at Watford Community Housing for 17 years and joined the GMT to share my housing experience, to be the voice of tenants who

are unable to raise their concerns and to work with Watford Community Housing towards providing an efficient and effective service for our customers."



Scan the QR code to find out more about the rest of the GMT members and how you can get involved.



What have your GMT been up to lately?



- Our GMT played a key role in us receiving our C1 grading (see page 3). A large part of the inspection looked at how we listen to our residents and make improvements based on feedback. The inspectors observed a scrutiny session run by the GMT, a session which clearly demonstrates the influence tenants have on our improvements.
- Members of our GMT attended Tpas's National Tenant Conference 2024 in July, and were asked to share their own views around the new consumer regulations following our inspection.
- The GMT came up with the brilliant 'Love your neighbourhoods' campaign that you can read about on page 7.
- Following a tenant question time and scrutiny session on fly-tipping, the GMT advocated for more covert cameras to be used in fly-tipping hotspots to tackle the issue.
- The team championed a change that means all profits from this year's

increase in garage rent will be going into our Welfare Fund – we estimate that the extra £150 a week in rent from each of our garages will mean £70,000 more goes to our Welfare Fund!

- The GMT have also held community meetings to discuss important issues such as the new consumer regulations, taken part in sessions with the Group Board to look at key issues such as the rent increase and cost-of-living, and helped shape important policies such as our Vulnerable Customers Policy.
- At our Annual General Meeting on 16 September, Chris Blackett, Chair of the GMT, gave an update to everyone on all the important work the group does.
- The GMT also helped us create this year's annual report to residents, which you can read by scanning the QR code or by visiting our website at wcht.org.uk/annual-report-home/



Dates for your diary

Solo Stars Christmas party –
8 December – 4pm at Leavesden Green Community Hub

Aladdin pantomime –
14 December – 5pm at Watford Palace Theatre – discounts available for Solo Stars members

Lighthouse Cafe Christmas carol service – 19 December from 6.30pm at Leavesden Green Community Hub

Tenant Question Time: Communicating and staff getting back to you – 22 January 2025 from 6.30pm to 8.30pm at Gateway House and online via Zoom

Scrutiny session with GMT: Communicating and staff getting back to you – 5 February 2025 from 6.30pm to 8.30pm at Gateway House and online via Zoom

Shared owner session: Our services – 11 February 2025 from 6.30pm to 8pm online via Zoom

Leaseholder session: Our services – 13 February 2025 from 6.30pm to 8pm online via Zoom

Would you like to take part?
Email community@wcht.org.uk to find out how you can get involved.

Gardening competition –
see page 8 – judging takes place on 17 June 2025

