

neighbourhood news

The magazine for residents of West Kent Housing Association
ISSUE 73: SUMMER 2016

YOUR HOME, YOUR RESPONSIBILITY

WHAT YOU CAN EXPECT FROM US AND
WHAT WE EXPECT FROM YOU SEE PAGE 2

CHANGES TO FENCING PAGE 5

HELPING TENANTS HELP THEMSELVES PAGE 6

2016 RESIDENT ANNUAL REPORT PAGES 10 & 11

WestKent

Places to live. Space to grow.

WELCOME FROM FRANK

WELCOME TO SUMMER - AS I WRITE THIS IT IS SUNNY AND WARM.

The good news is that by the time you read this, England will not yet have been knocked out of the Euro 2016 football tournament - though it will probably be raining. And we will still be waiting to vote on whether Britain knocks itself out of the European Union. We certainly live in interesting times. Importantly for us, we will soon know what the Government's Housing Bill finally has in store.

In the meantime we have been looking at what we offer you as your landlord. More on 'Your Home, Your Responsibility' inside. We are also continuing our efforts

to build more new homes to meet housing need in Kent and help tackle the national housing crisis. And beyond our role as a landlord, there are a number of articles about how we support individuals and communities. Places to live - space to grow.

Finishing on an optimistic note I predict that the sun is going to shine all summer. That may seem unlikely, but as Leicester City proved, unlikely is an outdated concept these days.

Frank Czarnowski
Chief Executive



YOUR HOME, YOUR RESPONSIBILITY



At West Kent we take our relationship with tenants seriously, and so we have been working over the past few months on what our core service should be and what we expect from our tenants in return.

That work will take time to complete - and we'll need help from tenants - but as a first step we have set out how our own 'special relationship' works.

We explain it in a new document called 'Your Home, Your Responsibility', which you can read on our website at www.westkent.org/YHYR

As the document explains: "We provide you with a place to live you can call home. In return you will pay your rent and keep to all your other tenancy responsibilities".

'Your Home, Your Responsibility' tells you what you can expect from us, from the moment you join West Kent as a tenant to the day you move out of your home. It also sets out what we expect

from you; the things you agree to when you sign your tenancy agreement.

But the document is just the start. Our service is based on what we have to do as a landlord, as set out in regulations or in law, and our next step is to work on exactly how we can deliver that service. We know it will involve changes to the way we work and how we organise the landlord side of the business.

We will need your help with this so we would like to hear from residents who are interested in helping to shape the future of our housing services.

Keep an eye on the website for more details of how you can be involved.

GIVING TENANTS A FLYING START

WOULD-BE TENANTS IN SEVENOAKS AND EDENBRIDGE ARE THE LATEST TO HAVE BEEN GIVEN MUCH-NEEDED HELP WITH CHOOSING THEIR BEST ROUTE TO A RENTED HOME.

West Kent's Flying Start project has been introduced to give potential tenants across Sevenoaks a much-needed helping hand in finding themselves a home to rent and giving them the skills to succeed in their tenancy - either in the social or private rented sector.

Flying Start workshops, which included lunch, childcare vouchers and help with travel, were held in Swanley on 21 April and in the Edenbridge Centre a week later.

Flying Start, commissioned by Sevenoaks District Council, is run by co-ordinator Brendan Abernethy, whose goal is to help people find their way through the rental maze and tell them about opportunities and support they might not have been aware of.

Equally importantly, Brendan tries to make sure that when tenants do secure a



Brendan and Elizabeth who found a locally rented home after attending a workshop

tenancy they understand the importance of paying their bills and sticking to their tenancy agreement.

As well as sharing his skills, contacts and information at Flying Start sessions, Brendan is always happy to talk to people who get in touch with West Kent looking for advice in this complex area.

As well as sessions on topics including private and social housing options, securing a rented property while on benefits, tenancy rights and responsibilities, and benefit and debt advice, all attendees are offered a one-to-one session tailored to their housing need.

"The aim is to help people but also to encourage them to be realistic and to focus on what is best for their situation," said Brendan.

"What we want to do is help people find suitable accommodation and then protect their tenancy by understanding their rights and responsibilities. We also work closely with Citizens Advice, Sevenoaks District Council's private letting scheme, the HERO project and West Kent Debt Advice.

"The sessions are useful for anyone looking for a rented home in the Sevenoaks district and who need access to free specialist housing advice."

Brendan has so far run ten workshops attended by 90 people and 104 one to one sessions. Eight people have been housed and he has helped to prevent one eviction. He can be contacted on 01732 749964.

ABACUS IN MAIDSTONE HAS MOVED HOME

Our Abacus store in Maidstone is providing the same great bargains, but in a brand new home.

Abacus sells low cost, pre-owned furniture, white goods and other necessities, giving it a new lease of life as well as supporting families who are trying to furnish their home on a budget.

The social enterprise, run by West Kent Communities, also provides training and volunteering opportunities for local people who help run the venture.

The store has now moved to 2, Senacre Square, ME15 8QF, to make way for redevelopment work now being carried out at Parkwood in Maidstone, where it used to be based.

"I'd like to say a big thank you to everyone who helped us move and we are looking forward to seeing old and new customers at Senacre Square", said retail supervisor Kim Palmer.

The telephone number for the new Abacus store is 01622 620464.



TOUGHER RULES TO SPEED THINGS UP



TOUGHER RULES HAVE BEEN INTRODUCED IN A BID TO SPEED UP THE TIME IT TAKES FOR OUR TENANTS TO MOVE HOMES.

We want to streamline the process and cut costs by making sure tenants leave their homes clean and in good condition when they move from one home to another.

We are doing this by reinforcing our 'Your Home, Your Responsibility' policy, which means tenants can't move from one West Kent home to another if they have any type of debt to us or if the property is not left clean and clear in good decorative order and with permission for any alterations or improvements.

In the past we told tenants that we needed them to get their home up to scratch when we offered them a move,

but now we are giving people more notice by informing them of the rules as soon as they register to move.

A letter will be sent to everyone wanting to move setting out the rules. It reminds

"We ask people to clean their home thoroughly, put right any damage, report any repairs that are our responsibility and put right decorative problems such as peeling wallpaper or walls that have been drawn on by children"

people that they must not be in arrears or have any other debts to West Kent and that their home must be in good condition and well decorated.

We ask people to clean their home thoroughly, put right any damage, report any repairs that are our responsibility and put right decorative problems such as peeling wallpaper or walls that have been drawn on by children.

Remember also that you won't be able to move to another West Kent home if you have made any alterations to your property without permission. You can email CustomerServices@wkha.org.uk or phone 01732 749400 for advice.

If you don't meet these conditions, we will not offer you another West Kent home. Other landlords may also not offer you a new home if you aren't keeping your current tenancy conditions- and they usually ask us for a reference.

When you sign your new tenancy you must pay at least one week's rent, even if you are on benefits, and you will need to give us access to your home so we can complete repairs and offer viewings for new tenants before you move out.

We are also encouraging people to think about mutual exchange, as the process is usually quicker and simpler to organise.

Visit www.exchangelocata.org.uk to register and search for an exchange, or for more information visit www.westkent.org/MuEx1

CHANGES TO FENCING

A REVIEW AIMED AT ENSURING WE FOCUS OUR EFFORTS ON THE MOST IMPORTANT REPAIRS IN OUR TENANTS' HOMES MEANS A CHANGE TO OUR POLICY ON FENCING.

Wooden fencing is expensive to repair and is not always necessary at most of our properties, and so we have reviewed the way we will deal with repair requests in future.

The changes will help us counter the effects of government cost-saving measures that we think will cost us at least £15m over the next four years. We have spent nearly £500,000 a year on fencing in past years and can't afford to continue.

At the moment we have about 500 fencing repair jobs outstanding and we have written to all those people to explain what our new offer is.

We will continue to repair fencing where possible, but if a fence needs replacing, or is beyond economical repair we will:

- use four feet high chain link fencing between properties or at properties with access paths running along the garden boundary
- replace one six foot privacy panel immediately outside the back door if you have a house next door to you, but replace the rest with four feet high chain link

- replace rear garden gates that provide a secure access to the rear garden
- use four feet high chain link where a garden backs onto farm land
- use six feet high close boarded panels with concrete posts and gravel boards where a property backs onto a road or public right of way.

We will not replace walls, fencing or gates in front gardens, although tenants can erect their own fence if they have permission and follow planning regulations. Before any work is carried out, tenants must tidy their gardens.

Tenants who want a six foot wooden fence in situations where we are only able to provide chain link can ask us for permission to install their own - and pay for it - or can use our Housing Plus service to upgrade their fence at an estimated cost of £20 per metre.

If your home was built within the past five years, there may be some planning issues that restrict what type of fencing you can have, so please contact West Kent before repairing or replacing a fence in a new property.



Please remember that the security of your children and/or any pets you have is your responsibility. If you are concerned about your children or pets the quickest solution is to repair your fence or install one yourself if you are able to.

To log a new fence repair request, please contact Customer Services on 01732 749400 or email customerservices@wkha.org.uk



HELPING TENANTS HELP THEMSELVES

IT'S EASY TO TALK ABOUT SUPPORTING TENANTS, BUT WHEN IT CAME TO JO WE DID MORE THAN JUST TALK.

Within a year of being evicted from her home for not paying her rent during what was "a difficult time" for her, Jo was offered a full time job working with us as a housing options officer.

Praising the patient support of the officers who had helped her turn her life around, Jo said: "I was at a very low point in my life and lost my home because I wasn't keeping up the payments.

"When the neighbourhood housing officer Ann Jones came to see me I just burst into tears because I was so pleased that someone was prepared to help me," she recalled.

"I can still hardly believe that this has all happened in one year. Without the help of the team at West Kent I just wouldn't have been able to get back on my feet. I don't know where I would have been if they hadn't had faith in me and given me a chance to start again"

Jo was able to get back on her feet - and back into her home - with support from a number of people including Mike Williams, otherwise known as the Sevenoaks HERO (Housing, Energy, Retraining Options) Officer, a role developed by West Kent, Sevenoaks District Council and JobCentre Plus.

With a secure roof over her head, the 40 year-old was able to focus on her future and took the chance of an unpaid work placement with the housing options team offered by West Kent's Training and Employment Officer Pauline Smith.

Although the placement was originally for 25 days over 12 weeks, it was extended to give Jo more experience and help her build her confidence as well as her work skills.

"At that point the Job Centre started to put pressure on me because they felt I

was unable to look for work because of the unpaid training I was doing," Jo said. "But that wasn't a problem because West Kent then offered me a full time job."

Jo said she had been "apprehensive" about starting work full time and juggling office hours with looking after three children, but she said she was "thrilled to have the opportunity and determined to prove myself".

She added: "I recently met up with some old friends who couldn't believe the change in me. They said it was like having the old me back again.

"I can still hardly believe that this has all happened in one year. Without the help of the team at West Kent I just wouldn't have been able to get back on my feet. I don't know where I would have been if they hadn't had faith in me and given me a chance to start again."





LEARN, DEVELOP AND SHARE YOUR SKILLS

PROVIDING SUPPORT FOR RESIDENTS LIKE JO IS ONE EXAMPLE OF THE WAY WE HELP RESIDENTS IMPROVE THEIR SKILLS AND JOB PROSPECTS WITH TRAINING, PLACEMENTS, APPRENTICESHIPS AND MORE.

Training and Employment Officer Pauline Smith is the first point of contact for people who want to help themselves to a better life by learning the skills that can help them get on the jobs ladder or move to a better paid position.

But it's not just about getting into work. As Pauline explained: "Even if you are not looking for work, you can still learn, develop and share your skills with your community - and you don't have to be a tenant to get involved."

Pauline runs a variety of different training courses, including accredited sessions in maths and English to provide

the skills that are most in demand from employers through to 'softer' skills such as beginners' floristry.

The courses, including emergency first aid at work, level 1 food safety, computer training, self-esteem and confidence and healthy cooking, are all free and open to people who are over 19 and unwaged or in low paid work.

"We help people understand what they want to do, help them set goals and then help them achieve those goals," Pauline explained. "We can help with CVs and application forms and we can find volunteering roles and work placements.

We also have good contacts with other organisations and charities who are there to help.

"While in Jo's case, the work placement led to a full time contract as a housing options officer, for other people it may just give them more confidence when they next go for an interview. We are there to give individuals the support they need."

West Kent's apprenticeship schemes have also developed a reputation for providing good training and for leading in many cases to full time work.

Final details of the training programme are still being agreed.

For more information call Pauline on 01732 749426 or email pauline.smith@wkha.org.uk

A HELPING HAND FROM OUR OWN TENANTS

WHEN HOO COUPLE IAIN AND AMANDA WALTERS DECIDED THEY WOULD LIKE TO HELP A LOCAL ORGANISATION THEY RAN INTO A DEAD END - UNTIL THEY GOT IN TOUCH WITH WEST KENT.

“We spoke to a number of charities to offer our services, but all they really wanted was money,” explained Iain. “What we had was time, but it was only when we contacted West Kent that we received a positive response.”

That response was so positive, in fact, that Iain and his wife have found

themselves in the thick of things, working on all kinds of resident involvement projects for us.

After attending a Kent Engagement Group conference, the couple spoke to our Insight Coordinator Redmond Hartop, who quickly found them a place on the customer services focus group.

“We have only been West Kent tenants for a year, but we are really pleased with our home in Paddock Drive, Hoo, and we were so impressed with how the association works that we wanted to contribute,” Iain said.

“While every other landlord we came across only seemed to be interested in

the rent, we felt West Kent really cared about the service they delivered.”

After contributing to the customer services focus group, Iain and Amanda worked with the iNHomes team, welcoming someone from the repairs team into their home to talk about their experiences and find out more about the service.

“I am sure that if tenants became more involved they would understand more about how the service worked, why things happen within a certain timescale and how West Kent needs to work with its budget,” explained Iain.

“By getting involved, you get a much better idea of how the service works as well as being able to contribute to improvements.”

Iain, 41, and 34 year-old Amanda, who uses a wheelchair, have both also trained to be resident internal auditors.

“Amanda is medically retired and I am her full time carer and so we have time to spare and wanted to give back to the community. Other residents with less time could still help - just filling in one survey can make a difference.”

The couple also helped by giving feedback on our website. “I said I felt the survey questions were a bit limited, and by the next day it had been redesigned to take my comments on board,” Iain said.

“West Kent is a great landlord and we are really pleased to be able to help,” Amanda added.



“While every other landlord we came across only seemed to be interested in the rent, we felt West Kent really cared about the service they delivered”



PUTTING THE 'FUND' INTO FUN DAYS

CASH GRANTS ARE AVAILABLE TO HELP VOLUNTARY GROUPS ACROSS KENT PUT ON EVENTS AND ACTIVITIES THAT BENEFIT LOCAL COMMUNITIES.

In 2015 West Kent Communities gave 37 local groups up to £500 each to support events and activities organised by volunteers. The money came from the Linda Hogan Community Fund, which helps people of all ages to get together, share experiences, enjoy new activities and, importantly, have fun.

One of the groups that benefited from the fund last year was the people of Park Wood, Maidstone, who organised a fete

and asked us for help with the costs of a spinning teacups ride for the children.

Aimee Bartlett, who helped organise the event, said: "Around 1,000 local people attended the fete and the teacups ride was definitely one of the highlights, being enjoyed by hundreds of children. The fete gave people a chance to have fun without having to worry about affordability. Many of them said they felt proud to live in Park Wood."

Funding is still available for our next two grant rounds, with application deadline dates of 15 June and 15 October 2016. We welcome any ideas for things you would like us to help fund - up to a maximum of £500 - but your group must be a non-profit organisation and your activity must benefit people living in Kent.

To find out more, including how to apply for funding, visit www.westkent.org/ LindaHogan or contact Elaine Granger at West Kent Communities on 01732 749420.



WestKent

Places to live. Space to grow.

Your 2016 Resident Annual Report

is now available to read on our website!

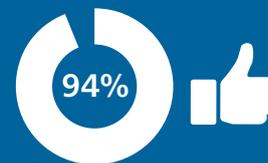


Here's a snippet of what's in your Resident Annual Report...

In 2015 we invested more than £14.7m looking after rented homes. During the year we replaced 205 doors, 24 windows, 415 boilers, 82 central heating systems, 261 kitchens, 212 bathrooms and 4 roofs.

We introduced a new process in January 2015 called 'Making it Right' to make it easier and quicker to resolve your complaint the first time you contact us. We got better as the year progressed, with only 3.6% of complaints in the second half of the year escalating to a formal complaint.

Satisfaction with our repairs service met our target for 2015, reaching 94 per cent.



Mystery shoppers



15 SHOPPERS were very or fairly satisfied with their experience



THREE were fairly or very dissatisfied



Mystery shoppers spent three months contacting our customer services team. Most of the mystery shoppers said they received a good standard of service over the telephone, by email or in person. We'll use the results to help us improve and we're already tackling the issues raised.

They enquired about a wide range of issues including repairs, rats, dog barking and kitchen refits.

To read the full report and other articles go to westkent.org



No internet access?

Why not visit one of our offices to view the report online. Or your local library has internet access.

If you need any help please call West Kent 01732 749400.

YOUNG PARENTS CLUB

A CLUB SET UP TO HELP YOUNG PARENTS IS GOING FROM STRENGTH TO STRENGTH AFTER A SUCCESSFUL FUN DAY FEATURING A NUMBER OF 'DESPICABLE' CHARACTERS.



Edenbridge's Friday Club put on the fun day in February to try to reverse a decline in numbers - and it succeeded in an impressive fashion.

Within a few weeks the club, which meets at HOUSE in the Eden Centre, had signed up six new families, organised a successful day out and fixed up a number of training sessions for its new members.

"It was great to see such a good response to the fun day," commented Amy Cole-Perner, who runs the West Kent-backed group.

"The event was well supported and attracted half a dozen local young families who decided that the Friday Club had something to offer them - and their youngsters - every week."

Amy explained that the club had needed new members because a batch of mums

close to the upper age limit of 25 had left together. "Ironically, because Friday Club had helped them become such good friends, as soon as one left they all followed," she added.

"Friday Club offers somewhere for mums to meet, take part in craft activities with their youngsters, get advice if they need it and even go on trips, so we knew it was meeting a need. It was just a question of reaching out to people, and the fun day achieved that."

Amy's fun day planning was supported by young mum Lauren Perry, who was so impressed with the difference the Friday Club made to her life when she arrived in the town that she wanted to see others benefit in the same way.

"The group really did change my life," she recalled. "I started coming when Brodie was just eight months old, I

quickly made some good friends and by coming to the library for the meetings I found a job, too. It's a really good place to chat to other mums and perhaps even share issues and anxieties."

As numbers at the free weekly sessions began to rise following the fun day, Amy asked members where they would like to visit. The group chose The Hop Farm Family Park at Paddock Wood, a venue which proved a hit with everyone.

With much of what the Friday Club organises driven by the members themselves, Amy has now been asked to set up a paediatric first aid course and is also planning to organise a self-esteem course in June.

"We still have vacancies if any young parents would like to attend, and everything is free - including the trips," said Amy. "Contact me by emailing amy.cole-perner@wkha.org.uk for more information."



SETTLING INTO RAMSGATE

OUR SUPPORTED ACCOMMODATION AT LIBRARY HOUSE, RAMSGATE IS ALREADY PROVING A HIT WITH RESIDENTS.

Library House is one of the first two supported housing schemes handed over under the Kent Excellent Homes for All project, with the other one being Lantern House in Ashford.

The Ramsgate scheme is designed to help tenants who may be moving on from other accommodation offering more support and who are working towards being able to live independently

Alison, who is supported by Samantha Hammond from Horizons, spent time on a life support machine and was then cared for in hospital and on a psychiatric ward after being found unconscious in her flat.

She explained: "When I was offered this accommodation I felt extremely lucky. I didn't know what to expect but was assured it was a brand new building and we would all be in it together as a team.

"I guess I expected it to be a bit like rehab, where I would not be allowed in my room at certain times, and I felt I would be hassled to get better quickly. I presumed it would be better than my current situation on the ward so I took the opportunity."

Now settled into her new place, Alison said the project has exceeded her expectations. "I feel I am free to make my own choices about how I live my life,"



"I highly recommend this project, which has enabled me to live an independent life with support where I need it"

she said. "I have been able to go on trips out, supported by the staff, and have so far visited Ramsgate's war tunnels, the zoo and the cinema.

"I am supported when I go shopping which helps as I often struggle doing it alone. I am free to be in my flat when I want and I do not feel hassled. I feel that with the support of both Horizons and Avondale I receive the best care possible.

"My mental health is monitored, I am being supported with my medication and

I am enjoying the social activities and new groups such as the walking group.

"The flat is bright and cheerful and I have made it feel like home. The facilities are lovely and I was given all I need including a vacuum cleaner, utensils and cups. I also have a walk in shower that was designed to meet my needs.

"I can socialise in my flat with my friends and family and I enjoy being able to have girly nights and have my parents over.

"I like the fact there is more management support in this project than I am used to. Staff are really nice and very supportive.

"I highly recommend this project, which has enabled me to live an independent life with support where I need it. I feel very lucky to be where I am right now considering where I was a year ago."



8-12s GROUP GETS SUPPORT FROM LOCAL GOLF CLUB

ONE OF OUR 8-12s GROUPS, WHICH AIM TO BROADEN THE HORIZONS AND BOOST THE SELF-ESTEEM OF YOUNG PEOPLE, IS GOING FROM STRENGTH TO STRENGTH.

Around 20 young people attend the West Kingsdown 8-12s Project every week in term time, enjoying craft activities, team games, sports, workshops and visits from organisations and people ranging from the fire brigade to exotic animal enthusiasts.

Now, the father of three children who have all been members of the group is giving something back by making it his golf club's charity of the year.

Not only have Paul Salvage's children all been involved with New Ash Green 8-12s,

but his wife Kim now works for project organisers West Kent Communities after joining the group as a volunteer.

As incoming captain of Redlibbets Golf Club, based in New Ash Green, Paul is setting out to raise a four-figure sum for the group over the coming year.

"The 8-12s Project does a great job inspiring confidence in young people and helping them to learn new skills, make friends and have fun," he said. "All three of our children have really benefited from it, particularly by

becoming more confident, and so I decided that I would name it as my charity for the year."

We also run 8-12s groups in Swanley, New Ash Green and Sevenoaks, with around 120 youngsters benefiting from the activities on offer.

"The children are all referred to the project by their school or a professional person for some reason," explained Kim, who now works as a West Kent Communities youth worker for three hours a week. "They might be

experiencing bullying or isolation, be lacking in confidence or just need a bit more structure in their lives.

“The group follows a charter which the young people themselves devised and they meet regularly to discuss what they would like to do or who they would like to invite to visit the club and talk to them. Here we have a strict ‘no phones’ rule, which can be a bit of a challenge!”

Paul added: “It gets children out of the house, gives them opportunities to

achieve new goals and boosts their self-confidence and social skills. I’ve been really impressed over the years with the support it gives young people and that’s why I wanted to help.”

The 8-12s Project Coordinator Sophie Butler, who runs our West Kingsdown group, explained that while core funding for the 8-12s Project was provided by BBC Children in Need and the Big Lottery, donations from groups such as the golf club played a vital part in supporting trips out and other activities the children enjoyed.

Youngsters from West Kingsdown have enjoyed activities including abseiling, ice skating, swimming and a visit to the pantomime, and Sophie said the golf club’s support would help make sure such events could continue.

“We are delighted that Paul and his members will be raising money for us this year,” said Sophie. “We also need more volunteers at all the groups and would love to hear from anyone with a

couple of hours a week to spare to help out. You don’t need to be a parent like Kim.”

One of the golf club’s biggest annual fund raisers is a charity day for members and guests, which will take place this year on Sunday 25 September.



“The 8-12s Project does a great job inspiring confidence in young people and helping them to learn new skills, make friends and have fun”

MAKING TENANTS MORE COMFORTABLE

Carol Parsons is happy in her home and happy that she can stay there, thanks to work we have done to make her feel safer.

After moving to Kent from Dorset in 1979, Carol and her late husband William lived in Cherry Avenue and Conifer Way in Swanley before moving to Walnut Way more than 16 years ago.

After she fell down the stairs, Kent County Council put in handrails for her and also created a mobility scooter store at the front of her home.

Since then we have used disabled facilities grant cash to install a stair

lift and extra hand rails in 68 year-old Carol’s kitchen and bedroom.

“I have mobility problems and only get out once a week,” she explained. “The stair lift and rails have made a huge difference to my independence and allowed me to stay living at home.

“I can’t emphasise enough how helpful Jodi Kucers, the Disabled Facilities Grant Case Manager, and her team at West Kent have been. It’s made a tremendous difference to my life and I feel much safer now. I am very happy with what West Kent has done.”



ONLY THE BEST FOR OUR TENANTS

WE PRIDE OURSELVES ON THE HIGH STANDARD OF OUR HOMES AND ON DELIVERING GREAT VALUE FOR OUR TENANTS, WHICH IS WHY WE USE GOOD QUALITY, LONG-LASTING PRODUCTS.

Our 'just in time' approach to replacing items when they wear out means that we fit things we know will last for a reasonable length of time and that will do a great job until they need replacing.

"Clearly some people may experience the occasional problem, but we aim to choose products we can trust so we know we are getting good value at the right price," explained iNHomes Manager Darren Hall.

"We want the items in your home, such as bathrooms, kitchens and boilers, to last as long as the industry standard, so we monitor them to make sure they achieve that standard. We don't fit cheap items because they would need replacing



more regularly - and cost us more in the long term.

"As an example, the boilers we install are top of the range and score highly for quality and energy efficiency.

"We regularly compare the products we use with the alternatives and if we feel there is a better quality item on the market we consider switching to it.

"It's about getting the right balance between cost and quality to achieve great value for money and a good quality of life for our tenants. And then it's about continuing to check we are still meeting those aims."

"We want the items in your home, such as bathrooms, kitchens and boilers, to last as long as the industry standard, so we monitor them to make sure they achieve that standard"

WE'RE BACKING APPRENTICES

SOME OF OUR APPRENTICES SHARED THEIR EXPERIENCES WHEN THEY ORGANISED AN EVENT IN SUPPORT OF NATIONAL APPRENTICESHIP WEEK 2016.

At West Kent we have supported apprenticeships for many years, providing opportunities in customer services, housing management, marketing and other areas of the business.

We highlighted that support when we welcomed visitors to a successful 'Made by Apprentices' event at our offices in Sevenoaks in March.

A number of our apprentices, including 21 year-old Charlotte, have gone on to work for us full time, as well as picking up valuable skills and experience on the way.

Charlotte began a one-year apprenticeship with our Customer Services Team in October 2014, but after just seven months we offered her a full time job.

"The great thing was that West Kent also gave me the chance to carry on with my college course," she said. "I was able to complete my Level 2 NVQ in customer service even though I was a full time employee."

Charlotte was then offered a secondment to West Kent's Housing Options Team, where she is picking up experience she believes will help her when she returns to her customer services role.

"It's interesting to work with the Housing Options Team as that's where people begin their journey with West Kent by

applying for a home," she said. "It's those people that the customer services team is there to help later on."

Seventeen year-old Leila Clack, who played a major part in setting up the 'Made by Apprentices' event, is also studying for her NVQ Level 2 and wants to build a career with West Kent.

"The great thing was that West Kent also gave me the chance to carry on with my college course"



Both Leila and 18 year-old Housing Management Apprentice Jodie Stacey are studying under the Kent Training and Apprentices programme.

"We are visited by a tutor and given assignments every five weeks and West Kent gives us two hours of study time a week when we complete the assignments," she explained.

"The combination of studying and working - in my case alongside Jenny Swoish, one of the neighbourhood housing officers - really works well.

"I have always wanted to work in a job where I felt I was making a difference and housing really appeals to me as a career."



BRINGING TENANTS' VIEWS TO THE HEART OF WEST KENT

OLDER PEOPLE AND THOSE WITH A DISABILITY ARE MAKING A REAL DIFFERENCE TO THE WAY WEST KENT WORKS BY TAKING PART IN TWO FORUMS THAT ALLOW THEM TO SHARE THEIR VIEWS.

The Emerald Forum brings together people who live in West Kent's Emerald properties, which are designed for the over-55s, while Ability gives a voice to people with a disability.

West Kent's Insight Coordinator Redmond Hartop said both forums were helping the organisation by bringing a different perspective to the way we provide homes and deliver services across the county.

"They meet roughly every quarter, sometimes hearing from an external speaker, and they discuss issues that affect their particular group. They can then make recommendations about how we might do things differently in future.

"One of the issues that both the Ability and Emerald forums have looked at recently is the need to make sure that, as we move our services more and more online, we consider the needs of people who aren't part of the mobile phone generation or who may have other disabilities.



"We need to make sure we deliver services fairly and inclusively to the whole population, and that's why these forums are so important to us."

Both groups also reviewed our annual report and made a number of suggestions, mainly around making it easier to read, with simpler fact boxes. "They felt it should be 'shorter and sweeter'," said Redmond.

We run these forums regularly, so if you're interested in coming please get in contact with us.

"We are always keen to see new members," said Redmond. "The best way to find out more is to sign up to

our mailing list by emailing me at redmond.hartop@wkha.org.uk or calling me on 07515 064404."

"We need to make sure we deliver services fairly and inclusively to the whole population, and that's why these forums are so important to us"

MYSTERY SHOPPERS PROMPT CHANGE

WE'RE MAKING CHANGES AFTER MYSTERY SHOPPERS CARRIED OUT A THREE-MONTH INVESTIGATION INTO THE WAY OUR CUSTOMER SERVICES TEAMS AT SEVENOAKS AND SWANLEY RESPONDED TO ENQUIRIES.

While the results were generally positive, with most of the mystery shoppers reporting a good standard of customer service over the telephone and in person, we will be using the results to help us improve further in the way we respond to enquiries.

The mystery shopping exercise consisted of telephone calls, emails, and visits to test responses to different scenarios. It included drafting case studies and talking to the 'shoppers' at a feedback session afterwards.

The scenarios involved visiting the Swanley Link or Sevenoaks reception or making contact online or by telephone. Mystery shoppers were asked to:

- Report a real repair in their property and record the response to the enquiry, how the repair was handled and the repair itself.
- Report a problem with a dog barking in the local area but say they were not sure which property the noise was coming from.
- Ask for a copy of a rent statement on behalf of another tenant.
- Rearrange their annual gas safety check if/when they received an appointment.
- Ring or go online to ask West Kent to help with a minor repair or odd job listed in the handyperson leaflet.

- Report rats in the garden.
- Query a service charge for the lift in their home despite the fact that it had not been serviced since 2013 and ask for an update.
- Find out why their flooring had still not been fixed a year after it had been damaged during a kitchen refit.

The research found a good standard of customer service over the telephone and also in person with 15 shoppers being very or fairly satisfied with their experience and only three fairly or very dissatisfied. Mystery shoppers felt staff gave a good response and 'stuck to their guns' even when put under pressure by the shoppers.

One member of the customer service team was mentioned several times as having given outstanding service and being knowledgeable.

There were several comments about the queuing system at the Swanley Link needing to be improved and signed better, and some staff were found to be confused about what was included in the handyperson service and who was eligible.

We will tackle a number of issues, including poor communication between staff and contractors around appointment times, staff not calling back when requested, the queuing and signage at Swanley and confusion over what is included in the handyperson service.



WE'VE HAD OUR ANNUAL CHECKUP - AND THE NEWS IS GREAT

ASSESSORS HAVE CONFIRMED WE CONTINUE TO MEET THE CUSTOMER SERVICE EXCELLENCE STANDARD.

The award itself is issued for three years but we have a visit every year to check we are still looking after our customers in the right way.

At our last full inspection in 2015 we successfully matched up against all 57 indicators as well as achieving something called 'compliance-plus' (scoring even higher than required) in five areas.

In January we were awarded a further three compliance-plus scores for:

- consulting with customers to continually improve our service

- using customer insight when developing strategies and policies
- working with partners and other providers to deliver co-ordinated services.

The assessor also talked to staff and to some tenants who agreed to take part in a focus group.

He wants us to work on further improvements by exploring:

- non-numeric approaches for target setting
- more creative ways to engage and consult with residents
- ways of changing customers' negative perceptions about the repairs service.

If you have other suggestions for areas where you think we could get even better, just get in touch with us.



GETTING IN TOUCH

CUSTOMER SERVICES

Contact our customer service advisors to pay your rent, report a repair or for any other housing related question.

- ☎ 01732 749400
- ✉ enquiries@wkha.org.uk

REPORT A REPAIR

- ☎ 01732 749400
 - ☎ 0800 169 1122
- between 8am and 5pm.
In emergencies at other times
- ☎ 0800 169 1122

✉ repairs@wkha.org.uk

🌐 www.westkent.org

HOUSING OPTIONS

(waiting list, bidding for homes)

☎ 01732 749433

WORRIED ABOUT YOUR DEBTS OR STRUGGLING TO PAY YOUR RENT?

Contact us as soon as possible for help and advice

- ☎ 01732 749400
- 🌐 www.westkent.org/payrent

ABACUS FURNITURE PROJECT

- ☎ Sevenoaks: 01732 743365
- ☎ Medway: 01634 296662
- ☎ Maidstone: 01622 620464

