

30

WestKent

1989 to 2019

West Kent Housing Association
Celebrating 30 years in housing

WE'RE 30 YEARS OLD!



Established in 1989, West Kent was one of the first large scale voluntary transfers of local authority housing. We were the first 'excellent' housing association in the country and the first gold standard Investor in People in Kent. We have an enviable reputation for helping people and communities flourish.

We believe that a good home is a foundation for getting on in life; our core purpose is to help the many people for whom a good home (to rent or buy) is too expensive, and to nurture their communities.

Our vision is to be the leading community provider of affordable homes in Kent and we are proud of the work we do. To celebrate our 30th birthday we are taking a look back at some of the work we have done, celebrating the people that live in our homes and acknowledging that West Kent remains at the forefront of innovative housing management in Kent.

We hope that you enjoy looking back with us.

Happy Birthday to us!

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NOT JUST A FURNITURE STORE...



Our Abacus Furniture stores have gone from strength to strength since the project was launched, to help people who needed low cost furniture for their homes.

Abacus has its roots in an informal project set up in the late 1990s, when staff decided to store unwanted furniture left by tenants who moved out of our homes instead of throwing it away.

"It was stored in an unused underground parking area which was opened once a week so that new tenants setting up home could take any furniture they needed free of charge," said Paula Meurs Enterprise Manager.

Soon after the scheme became so popular, we bought the warehouse at Greatness Lane, Sevenoaks and turned that into the first official Abacus Furniture store.

In 2003, West Kent Extra, (now part of West Kent) made the store the flagship project of the newly registered charity and opened it up to the public.

The success of the Sevenoaks project led to two more Abacus Furniture stores. Both of these have since been relocated, although the Sevenoaks store remains in its original home.

Our most recent shop in the heart of Walderslade Village, Medway, is already

proving very successful just two months after its launch.

"The figures are looking impressive, we have seen lots of customers through the door and the community has taken Abacus to its heart," commented Paula.

Abacus supports the community by making low-cost furniture and home goods available to local people, while helping the environment by keeping unwanted furniture, electrical goods and other items out of landfill.

"We have taken on four local members of staff to run the Walderslade store", Store Manager Mark Atkins explained: *"The customer response has already been so supportive and encouraging. Locals have welcomed us to the village and said how exciting it is to have something new here".*

Abacus recycles, on average, 99 tonnes of furniture that would otherwise have gone to landfill.



Residents on certain benefits are offered a

25% discount

at all three projects, in Walderslade, Sevenoaks and Shepway, near Maidstone. The stores collect donations free of charge, but there's a small charge for delivery.

SUPPORTING THE COMMUNITY

West Kent has always supported the wider community, and that focus extends to helping local charities.



Over the past 30 years West Kent's staff have raised more than £20,000 for others.

While the focus now is on local causes – some of them very dear to the hearts of staff who have lost loved ones – we have in the past supported wider causes, organising 'dress down days' for Pudsey and the BBC's Children in Need Appeal.

One staff member can remember volunteering to ride on Swanley Town Council's carnival float, while others helped at an annual kids' camp to support Beams (formerly Parents' Consortium), a Hextable charity that provides respite care for the families of disabled children.

In the past we invited staff to apply for a £50 donation towards any charity event in which they were personally involved, an initiative which saw various 'Race for Life' events benefit from West Kent cash for example.

About 15 years ago, we shifted the emphasis to the local community and invited staff to nominate a favourite local charity and vote for the winning cause if people came up with more than one idea.

The nominator then became West Kent's Charity Champion for the year and benefitted from the support of the rest of the organisation, with colleagues rallying around to organise cake sales, lunches, quizzes, family fun days, bacon rolls for breakfast and sponsored events of all kinds to support the chosen charity.

West Kent also donated money to charity to encourage people to fill in staff surveys and introduced volunteer days to encourage community support.

Recent fund-raising efforts include:

- 2013 we raised £2,700 for Think Twice, a charity set up by a West Kent gas engineer following the death of his wife in hospital.
- 2014 another sad year in which we raised £1,700 for a pancreatic cancer charity following the death of a member of staff, Eve Riches, as well as a further £1,474 for hft, a charity supporting people with learning difficulties in Edenbridge.
- 2015 staff raised £3,000, split equally between the Kent Cancer Trust and Darent Valley Hospital.
- 2016 this year's beneficiaries were Home Start and Tunbridge Wells Churches, both of which received £734.
- 2017 after the sad death of Emma Kent, our Extra Care Service Delivery Manager, we raised £5,000 for Alzheimer's and Dementia Support Services in Kent, a charity that was dear to her heart, in her memory.
- 2018 we began fund raising for mental health charity Mind and have to date raised £5,800 for the cause.

GROWING OUR OWN

Charlotte Ede knows the value of West Kent's work with young people and is determined to play her part in seeing it continue.



After making the most of what she describes as 'a fantastic opportunity' to join as a trainee working with what was then West Kent Extra, Charlotte is keen to help the children and young people that West Kent now support.

Throughout her time with West Kent, Charlotte has been closely involved with the Edenbridge Youth Forum and HOUSE at Edenbridge, and she is particularly proud of what the young people there have achieved.

Alongside HOUSE, which caters for teenagers, West Kent has also won an impressive reputation over the years for its work with young people through its network of 8-12s groups, which now spans seven locations across the Sevenoaks district.

The 8-12s groups cater for children who are referred to the scheme by professionals because they need extra confidence, social skills or self-esteem. The groups operate in Sevenoaks, Dunton Green, Edenbridge, West Kingsdown, New Ash Green and Swanley, where the original 8-12s has been joined by a new Swanley Nurture group.

"I owe an awful lot to West Kent," Charlotte said. "I joined at the age of 18, a West Kent resident myself, as a trainee administrator and later volunteered with Sevenoaks 8-12s for six months."

"In 2012 I started working three nights a week as a sessional worker at HOUSE at Edenbridge and so I have seen how committed West Kent is to working with young

people. It has always been a very important part of West Kent's commitment to the community."

After taking a few years out working elsewhere and travelling to Australia and Thailand, Charlotte returned in 2018 to become Youth Services Manager.

She now ensures that the legacy built up over the past 25 years continues to provide new opportunities for young people and has introduced a number of new initiatives.

West Kent works with the 8 to 11 age group in every primary school in the Sevenoaks District, running a six-week programme that promotes a healthy lifestyle to children in years four, five and six and helps older children prepare to move to secondary school.

"We focus on building resilience and on preparing children for all the changes they will meet, like travelling, increased work, making new friends and issues such as bullying," she explained.

For the older age group there are detached youth services one night a week in Hartley and centre-based sessions one night a week in both West Kingsdown and New Ash Green. These sessions focus on issues such as sexual health, drugs and alcohol, CV-creation, bullying, healthy cooking and crime and consequences.

The Edenbridge Youth Forum has become well respected locally and has been responsible for a number of

initiatives, including two impressive murals at the town's railway stations, a project to mark the centenary of the end of the First World War. The success of the forum has led to similar groups being set up in New Ash Green and West Kingsdown.

Charlotte explained: *"I hope that we are able to empower young people to take charge of their lives and become responsible citizens."*

The youth team's efforts have been reflected in a number of recent awards, with Cheryl Banks, Leader in Charge at HOUSE in Edenbridge being named UK Youth's Youth Worker of the Year and Edenbridge Youth Forum winning a Kent County Council Try Angle Award for Community Action. Nia Brown, a young person that attends HOUSE, also won a Try Angle Award in the Good Friends and Carers' category.

"For me, youth work has always felt like destiny, because I often found myself having to choose a path and could

have taken either of them. I always had support from someone and made the right choices and now I want to help young people do the same," explained Charlotte.

Two more young people are now following in Charlotte's footsteps as youth work apprentices, with Matilda Meteyard and Morgan Mitchell the latest to take advantage of the opportunities provided by West Kent.



60 IS THE NEW 40

60 is the new 40, according to scientists, with people now hitting middle age later, which means their housing needs are coming under review.



We've been working with architects Pelling to ensure that as we build on our first 30 years and look ahead to the next 30, we provide what this changing population needs.

Our 'Emerald' schemes provide homes based on standards agreed following consultation with residents.

At Bonney Court and Woodlands Court, Swanley, residents lead independent lives in their own apartments but with an extra-care scheme, White Oak Court, around the corner, where they can eat at the restaurant and join the activities.

This approach reflects figures published by the Local Government Association in 2017 that suggest the number of people aged 65 and over will rise by 22% to 14.3 million by 2025. This means one in five of the total population will be over 65 in 10 years' time, rising to one in four by 2050.

We believe the secret lies in providing flexible accommodation that can be adapted as residents grow older. Lifetime Home Standards mean homes will have more floor and storage space and features such as partition doors, allowing the bedroom and living space to be opened-up as residents become less mobile.



Property Director

Mark Leader explained:

"Sometimes people don't make the right choices at the right time, only when they are forced to from a changing health situation. We are combating this by planning ahead by encouraging people to make lifestyle decisions earlier, based on in-depth research of accommodation preferences."

Communications specialist

Richard Aylwin added:

"The West Kent approach, along with that of other enlightened providers, needs to be seized upon by government as an example of how this country should move forward on senior living."

WAY BACK WHEN

West Kent formed in 1989 to deal with the voluntary stock transfer of around 6,300 homes from Sevenoaks District Council after tenants voted in favour of moving to a new landlord.

The transfer, the largest of its kind at the time, was clearly an important event for tenants and is a cause for celebration 30 years on, but it was far from the only significant event that year.

It was a year of change, both at home and abroad. Solidarity was elected into government in Poland and the Berlin Wall fell as a new era began.





Margaret Thatcher, who in May of that year became the first British Prime Minister of the 20th century to remain in office for ten years, joined American President George Bush and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev to declare that the Cold War was over.

Back in the UK, house prices were falling, unemployment dropped below two million for the first time since 1980, and in Kent coal mining came to an end with the closure of the Betteshanger colliery.

In what was perhaps a sign of things to come, scientists announced that 1989 was the warmest on record, perhaps because of 'the greenhouse effect', while Voyager II passed the planet Neptune and its moon Triton, sending photographs back to earth.

The first of 24 Global Positioning System (GPS) satellites, now used daily by virtually every motorist

and smartphone user, was placed into orbit in 1989, which also saw the birth of Sky TV, the first release of Microsoft Office and the launch of the Nintendo Game Boy.

There was tragedy, too, with significant loss of life in the Hillsborough Stadium disaster, which saw 96 people crushed before the start of a football match between Nottingham Forest and Liverpool, and a further 51 died when the Marchioness pleasure boat collided with a barge on the River Thames.

Amidst these world-changing events, scientific progress, new technologies and ever-changing global politics, West Kent took on the challenge of providing safe and affordable homes, building neighbourhoods and shaping communities.

That journey continues to this day. Take a look at some of our photos from the last 30 years above.

WORKING HARD and having fun

WEST KENT'S VALUES compassion, integrity, flexibility, honesty, to name a few – are posted on the walls throughout our Sevenoaks headquarters.

But while the visible reminders are a recent addition to the offices, Craig Reynolds is convinced that the values themselves haven't changed – and he should know.

Craig, who joined West Kent from college at the age of 18, has now been with West Kent for 24 years and stressed: *"A lot of things have changed, but the underlying culture of caring about residents and doing the best for them is the same now as it was then."*

"The values are now on the wall, but that just makes them more visible. They were already embedded in the culture of the organisation," he pointed out.

Craig believes part of the reason West Kent has continued to deliver such a good service to tenants over the years is the fact that the whole team is focused on putting customers at the heart of what we do.

"It's about building relationships, both with colleagues as well as with customers," he said. "Whatever our individual job titles, we all have the same aim – to put customers first. So if I have the skills and knowledge to do something that needs doing, then it's part of my job."

Craig joined in 1995 as an Assistant Management Accountant Trainee and, with West Kent's support, gained his Chartered Institute of Management Accountancy qualification.

From Management Accountant, he progressed to Finance Manager and

is now Finance Director, making sure the books balance and that funding is in place to allow West Kent to keep its homes in good repair and deliver new ones.

"What's interesting is that I chose accountancy as a career, not housing," he explained. "I had no particular interest in social housing but what was a job has turned into a vocation. I am passionate about what West Kent does and about playing my part in supporting the people we house."

Craig claims he has never had the same day twice in his 24 years and believes that that is partly due to the fact that West Kent is "always looking for the next opportunity".

Determined not to become 'institutionalised', Craig makes sure he gets involved with other areas of the business. While more recent recruits now crunch the numbers, his main role is to analyse the figures, set the financial strategy and support the board's plans for future improvements.

While set to play a major part in West Kent's plans to grow to 10,000 homes by 2026, Craig is quick to stress that the important part of that statistic is the number of people who will be



housed, rather than the number of homes.

"We are making an impact on people's lives, and that's what it's all about.

Returning to West Kent's values, Craig had one final observation:

"Working hard and having fun – one of our values – is something residents understand when they hear it in your voice."

TENANTS AT THE HEART OF ALL WE DO



England's first ever purpose-built council house is in Penshurst and is a West Kent property.

Cherishing the organisation's independence, working closely with tenants and balancing the needs of present and future residents have all played their part in West Kent's successful first 30 years, according to Chief Executive Frank Czarnowski.

Frank joined West Kent in 2001 as Finance Director, taking over the top job as Chief Executive in 2010.

"It's amazing how much the world has changed over the past 18 years or so, but it's also surprising how much it has stayed the same," he reflected.

One of the fundamental things that has stayed the same, at least as far as West Kent is concerned, is our determination, under Frank's leadership, to put our tenants first.

"That was a commitment that had already been made in the business plan before I arrived, it was something we followed over the next decade, and it is something that has motivated me since 2010. I have no doubt it will continue into the future, too," he said.

Looking back at the launch of West Kent, Frank pointed out that as the country's second large scale voluntary transfer of homes (from Sevenoaks District Council), West Kent was in many ways "a guinea pig".

"We have learned a lot over the years but the important thing for me is that we are still here, still independent and still in our original guise."

"While many other housing associations have become much larger, joined forces with other organisations or been swallowed up, we have focused on our tenants, delivered a great service and grown steadily without losing sight of our aim."

Frank said it was important to balance the interests of today's residents – well-maintained, affordable homes in pleasant neighbourhoods – with the need to build more homes for future residents.

West Kent is continuing to build new homes and has ambitious plans, but is determined not to forget the interests of existing tenants, working closely with carefully selected maintenance contractors.

Choosing contractors is one of the ways in which we have always worked with residents, bringing them into working groups and even electing tenant board members.

"Involving residents at every level of our operation has been a vital part of our success," said Frank. *"Having resident insight*

around the board table keeps us honest and focused. That overlap between the two gets rid of any 'us and them' feelings and has been critical to our success."

On his own contribution to West Kent's history, he added: *"I think what I have done in particular is try to work out what is important and then focus on that. It's important to be careful what you promise and try to set goals that are deliverable."*

"Don't set people up to fail, don't patronise or stigmatise tenants and balance the interest of all the people whose lives you affect."

As for the future? *"West Kent has properties that date back to 1832. We are just custodians. I'm confident that with the team we have here, the good work will carry on long into the future."*



Not just bricks and mortar

Communities Director Heather Brightwell believes some of her colleagues are *"like a stick of rock"* – if you cut them in half you would find West Kent written right through them.



In truth, she would also find herself in this category, having arrived in 2005 to do two weeks' temping in housing allocations only to find herself still here 14 years later.

"I was amazed to find quite how many different aspects there were to the community work that the organisation was doing."

"I was already volunteering with the 8-12s project and when I learned about the community support, voluntary work, training and other youth work that was happening I jumped at the chance to join the team."

Heather continued to promote the clear message that *"we are about more than just houses and about more than tenants. We care about the people living behind every door in the street, not just number two and number five."*

It's a message that continues to this day, as West Kent continues to demonstrate that community work is not an 'added extra' but is embedded in the heart of what we do in our neighbourhoods right across Kent.

Our recently published Social Impact Report highlights the fact that we now provide at least three services in every borough or district in Kent.

The report highlights a few more telling statistics for 2018

- We secured £1.46m for community services
- We delivered 81,245 hours of housing-related support in Medway alone
- Young people attended our services 5,913 times
- The Linda Hogan Community Fund benefitted 6,680 people
- We saved 145 bikes from landfill, refurbished them and sold them
- We recruited 10 apprentices

- We recycled almost 100 tonnes of furniture that would otherwise have gone to landfill
- We provided a free Christmas dinner to 217 isolated people
- Volunteers gave 2,733 hours to the community by helping in our Abacus stores.

"We work hard to build strong communities because we are here for the long term," Heather explained. *"We own the homes, we care about our tenants and we work with people to create great neighbourhoods."*

The team also provides training and employment opportunities, support social enterprises, support people to live independently and avoid difficulties with their tenancy, as well as helping those in crisis.

"People stay even though the job changes, or the people change. They stick around to get the job done because they know it's important."



EXTRA CARE FOR THOSE who need it

One of the most ambitious challenges accepted by West Kent in the past 30 years was taking on the management of five extra care schemes on behalf of Kent County Council in 2017.

The five schemes – Copperfields in Ramsgate, Strawberry Hill in Dartford, Bowles Lodge in Hawkhurst, Spires in Tenterden and Beeches in Dover – were opened between February and July 2017 and together provide 218 homes.

Each of the five purpose-built extra care schemes provides a blend of independent living and 24-hour care and was built as part of the Kent Excellent Homes for All initiative.

The £100 million scheme provided 218 extra care apartments for people who are over the age of 55, have a care need and are on the local authority housing register.

Built by Galliford Try Partnerships, the schemes are being managed by West Kent under a 25-year contract, with Galliford Try Facilities Management repairing and maintaining the buildings and grounds.

At the opening of Strawberry Hill in Dartford, scheme manager Lorna Elcock said that the idea was "to help people live as independently as possible but with the support of knowing that there is help available when they need it."

All five schemes are modern, spacious and well equipped, with a restaurant, lounge, bar, laundry, gym, hair salon and computer suite. They are also pet friendly, something that was particularly welcomed by one of the

residents of Bowles Lodge in Hawkhurst. Eileen Thornton, then 83, moved into the scheme accompanied by Gizmo, her white cat.



Homes for furry friends too

Many things have changed during the 18 years that Tenancy Services Manager Julie Terry has worked for West Kent, but it's one of the smaller changes that she believes has made a big difference to people's lives.



"Our pets policy has been reviewed over the years, allowing more of our tenants to have animals in their homes, and that has had a great impact on many people," she said.

This approach to pets has seen West Kent win bronze, silver, gold and now platinum PawPrints Awards from the RSPCA.

"It's an important policy change for us as it's well known that having a pet is good for people's wellbeing, connectivity and mental health."



JULIE'S ROOTS IN social housing

Julie Terry's commitment to social housing has its roots in her own life, and in the kind of setbacks that can affect any one of us.

Now West Kent's Tenancy Services Manager, Julie has spent 18 years with West Kent and knows from experience how important social housing is.

"Up until I was seven, I lived on a large council estate in Tunbridge Wells. I didn't know it was social housing; it was just my home. All I knew was that I was safe and very happy."

Julie's parents had the chance to buy their own home and so the family moved, but at the age of 27 she went through a relationship breakdown.

"I became homeless and had to go into temporary accommodation before being provided with a tenancy and permanent home for me and my children," she recalled. "I was given a social housing property when I really needed it."

"After nine years I was able to buy a shared ownership property, but until then, the rented property provided a safe home in which my children could grow up happily."

"I love working for West Kent and I'm very proud to tell people. I believe we do a fantastic job. The safety of our tenants is important to us and we work hard to ensure our residents can close their door at

night and feel safe in their homes." "My experiences over the years enable me to appreciate residents' feelings when they go through difficult times and I hope that is reflected in the service my team provides."

She puts her long service down to 'the people I work with', pointing out that while the job and West Kent have both changed dramatically, the friendships she has made have continued.

And it's not just among her colleagues that Julie has made friends; she has built long-lasting relationships with many tenants, too.



"I still occasionally bump into people I signed up as tenants many years ago," she recalled. "It's great to see their children grow up and to know that West Kent has given them a secure, affordable home."

Linda Hogan Community Fund

While West Kent's focus will always be on providing homes, the past 30 years has seen it increasingly work to build communities, supporting young people, those with special needs and the elderly.



Central to that support is the Linda Hogan Community Fund, named after a member of staff who supported many of our community initiatives but who sadly died in 2009 after 11 years working with West Kent.

The Linda Hogan Fund makes £15,000 available to community groups across Kent each year, inviting them to apply for a maximum of £500 to support community events and activities such as fun days, trips out and training sessions.

"The application process is straightforward and we are keen to encourage groups to apply for funds to help towards their community event or activity," explained Elaine Granger, Team Performance Coordinator.

The list of projects supported in 2018 alone is impressive. It ranges from funding

a trip to the seaside for children with additional needs to an arts-based activity programme for families, and refurbishing a community garden tea shed.

There are three application deadlines each year, on the 15 March, June and October. Groups can apply more than once but are limited to the

£500 maximum grant in one year.

At the end of the year, organisations are invited to apply for a fourth round of funding, aimed at supporting Christmas activities. It helped to fund 14 Christmas parties in 2018.



A HOME *for life*

While we continue to build new homes across the county, we also have many long-standing tenants, some of whom joined us at the time of the stock transfer from Sevenoaks District Council in 1989.

One of those, 86-year-old Mrs Frances Stowell, has been living in her home in Springfield Road, Edenbridge for 61 years.

After marrying husband Michael in 1953, the couple lived with Frances' mother for five years before they were offered the tenancy in Edenbridge, by which time they had a three-year-old daughter, Hazel.

"It was weird when we first moved out, but at the same time it was good to have a place of our own," said

Frances, whose husband passed away three years ago.

The young couple were the second tenants in the house, which has since been home to Frances for six decades. *"The rent was 25 bob a week"* (around £1.25 now) she commented.

Frances said that since taking over as her landlord 30 years ago West Kent

had done a good job. *"Within reason they have done everything I have asked for over the years and I can't complain,"* she commented.

She had one piece of advice for the future: *"Always look at both sides of the story so you get the whole picture before making a decision. That's really important."*



Part of the COMMUNITY

Two of our newer tenants revealed that they feel 'blessed' to be living in their home in Hillcrest Road, Four Elms.

Paul Rowe-Needham, took on the tenancy with his wife Caramia a year ago. The couple were facing eviction after their private sector landlord refused to deal with their complaints about the heating system, and were delighted when they were offered a West Kent property.

After working hard to renovate and decorate their new home, Caramia is now spending lots of time in the garden of their ground floor flat, brightening the neighbourhood and making friends at the same time.

"The neighbours are lovely and have been popping over with plants or just to have a chat," she said. *"It's so nice to be part of the community. We feel really blessed."*

Caramia, from Zimbabwe who joined her husband in 2015 after immigration paperwork had finally been completed, is struck by the contrast with her home country.

"It is amazing to live in a country where things just work," she said. *"Where you turn the tap on and water comes out, or flick the switch and immediately have power rather than wondering how long you might have to wait until the electricity is working again."*

"It's also a real eye-opener to see how helpful and supportive people are, particularly if you do your best to contribute in return."

"West Kent has been awesome and we are so grateful for their help. In my country we would have been out in the streets by now."

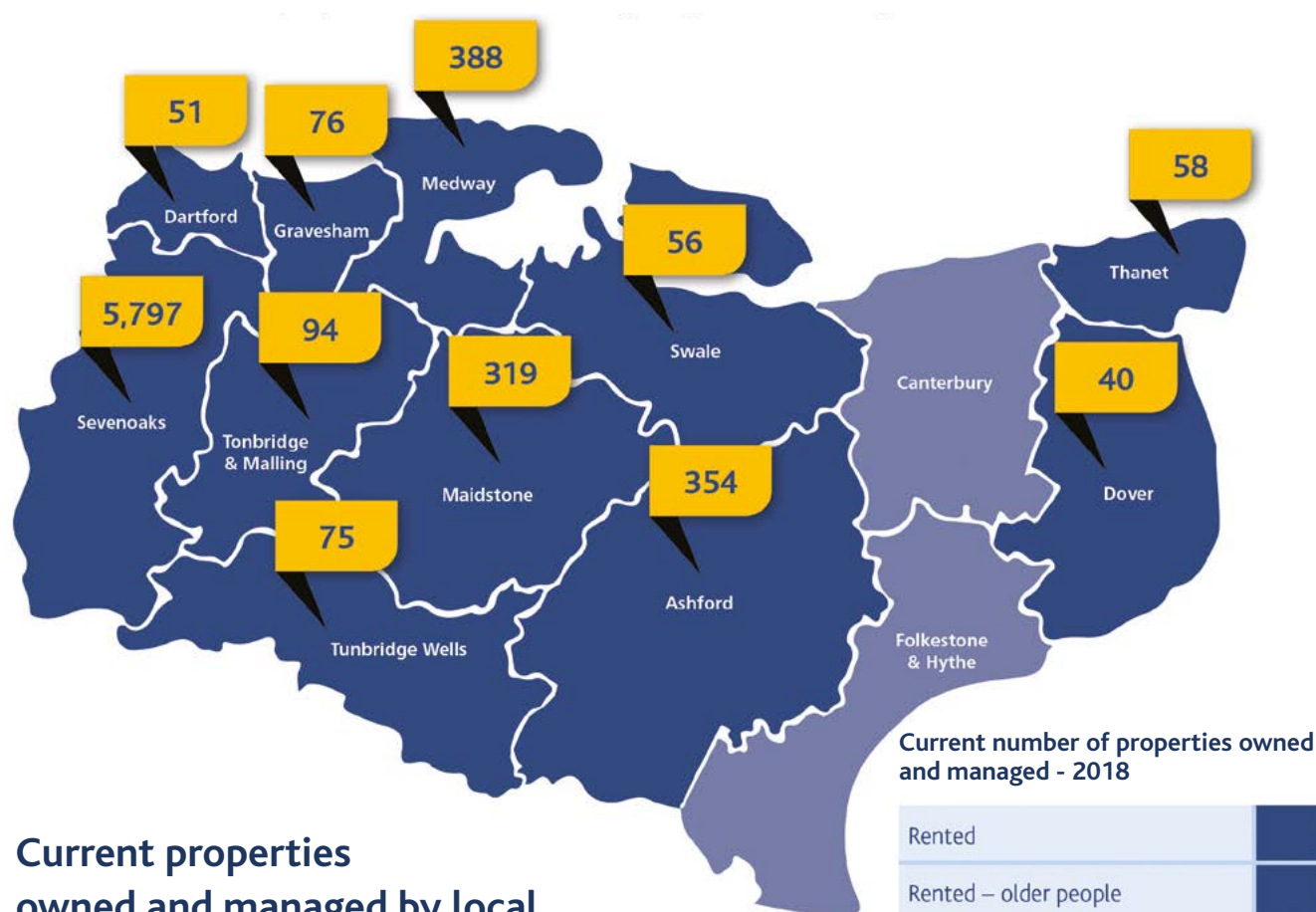
Paul was taken as a child to Africa, where he went on to own mining and construction companies, but he also had skills as a paramedic which he put to good use when he returned to the UK and worked as a carer.

"I would like to congratulate West Kent on its 30th anniversary," said Caramia. *"I am sure that with their dedicated staff and the commitment they show to their tenants and neighbourhoods they can look forward to an equally great future."*



DEVELOPING THE FUTURE

More homes for older people, more homes in the east of the county and a continuing focus on maintaining and improving the existing stock – that’s the message from Property Director Mark Leader as he looks back on the past 30 years and forward to the future.



Current properties owned and managed by local authority area

While the targets are challenging, Mark believes they are all achievable, thanks to the board’s ambition and the values of the organisation.

Mark is one of many long-standing staff in the organisation, having joined in 2002, when West Kent was still focused very much on the Sevenoaks district.

“We had 5,300 homes at the time and we realised that we couldn’t survive by only building in Sevenoaks,” he recalled.

Current number of properties owned and managed - 2018

Rented	5,504
Rented – older people	1,119
Low cost home ownership	507
Homes managed by others	3
Leaseholders	175
TOTAL HOMES OWNED AND MANAGED	7,308
Homes under construction	425

“We were known for ‘punching above our weight’ at the time, and our three stars from the Audit Commission in 2006 helped even more, which meant that when we started to talk to developers and councils in other parts of Kent, they had at least heard of us.”

The success of that forward planning is reflected in the fact that of the 2,000 homes added to the stock since 2002, 1,500 of these are outside Sevenoaks.

Ashford and Medway were the first new areas of growth, but there was soon another challenge. *"We soon realised we couldn't rely on housebuilders to ask us to manage the affordable element of their schemes, but instead had to do our own thing, finding land and getting planning permission ourselves,"* Mark said.

Growth from 2008 onwards was steady, with an average of 100 new homes being built each year up to July 2015, although there were peaks, with an impressive 650 homes added to the stock between 2008 and 2011.

"What was interesting – and quite exciting – was that when austerity came along in 2015 and we had the added challenge of reducing our rents by 1% a year, the board said we should press on – and promptly doubled our annual target to 200 homes," Mark recalled.

That target has now been increased again, to a challenging 3.5% a year, which equates to roughly 300 homes. West Kent expects to complete 322 homes in the current year, although completions are always in the hands of developers.

Future growth will focus on east Kent, with schemes already in the pipeline in Canterbury, Thanet, Walmer, Dover and Folkestone, and on provision for elderly people, including new hubs similar to our White Oak Court scheme in Swanley.

The strategy to 2026 is based on building roughly 50% shared ownership homes and 50% for social or affordable rent, although the exact split will vary from site to site.

Mark is confident that West Kent's homes are safe and secure, with West Kent notching up impressive figures in areas such as gas safety checks, electrical safety and compliance with fire and asbestos regulations.

We've been improving the energy efficiency of our older homes and installing new windows, doors, bathrooms and kitchens to ensure we meet Decent Homes standards.

Looking ahead, Mark is hoping West Kent will be able to explore new building methods, using 'modern methods of construction' to provide new, energy efficient homes.

PlaceShapers



West Kent is a prominent member of PlaceShapers, a national network of around 120 housing associations that hold shared values around putting tenants first, creating safe neighbourhoods and involving tenants in making decisions.

"We helped to found PlaceShapers in 2007 and welcome the fact that it gives us much more of a voice in debates around social housing. It's an influential body that allows us to play a part in shaping the future. We wouldn't have the same influence acting independently," said Frank, West Kent's Chief Executive.

As a member of PlaceShapers, Frank was asked to give evidence to a Joint Parliamentary Select Committee dealing with changes affecting supported housing funding.

"It's not something I would have been given the opportunity to do with my West Kent hat on," he commented. *"In the event it helped to influence government policy and benefitted tenants everywhere."*

MANY HANDS MAKE LIGHT WORK

Partnerships play a vital part in West Kent's approach to delivering homes and building neighbourhoods.

Our ability to work closely with others is reflected in the fact that each year, we raise almost £1m in grant funding to support community services.

One of the most ambitious partnership schemes of recent years saw West Kent take on the management of Kent County Council's 218 Kent Extra Care homes for 25 years from their opening in 2017.

We support the Give Us A Chance Consortium, which helps people into jobs and were able to lobby an

All Party Parliamentary Group around employment and training.

West Kent also works closely with local authorities including Medway Council, with which it delivered a joint initiative aimed at providing housing-related support to prevent people getting into difficulties with their tenancy rather than helping them when they're already struggling.

As well as the larger organisations and national networks we work closely with smaller bodies including local charities and voluntary groups in order to help build and maintain strong communities.

Relove A BIKE



One of our most successful projects in recent years has been the Relove a Bike project, which combines environmental and social aims in a unique way.

The scheme rescues old cycles that would otherwise be dumped in a landfill site and takes them to the Young Offenders Institution and HM Prison Rochester, where prisoners repair and renovate them.

The good-as-new cycles are then sold at an affordable price from one of our Abacus social

enterprise stores, potentially helping a low-income family access low cost transport or a healthy pastime.

Relove a Bike is great for the environment and also gives adult and young offenders a chance to learn a valuable new skill. Over the past five years it has seen around 1,995 cycles repaired, cleaned up and sold at West Kent's Abacus stores.

It's also proved to be a winner. After being 'highly commended' in the Kent Housing Group Awards in 2015 it went on to win a prestigious National Recycling Award which was presented to the team in a ceremony at London's Park Lane Hilton Hotel.

Our longest serving staff member

There's not much Tony Croucher doesn't know about West Kent's housing stock – and that's good news since he's part of the team that looks after it.

Tony has been responsible for many of our homes for longer than West Kent has been in existence, having moved with them as part of the voluntary stock transfer from Sevenoaks District Council.

"I had been looking after the homes while working for the district council for the previous seven years, so I now have 37 years' experience of many of them," he commented.

Tony, now Project Manager, also advised on the transfer and remembers that there was a *"strong, positive vote from tenants"* in favour of moving over to West Kent.

He believes tenants' confidence in the transfer has been justified over the years as West Kent *"has always aspired to be one of the best in the area and even in the country."*

He commented: *"Being named as the first 'three star' housing association in the country in 2006 showed how much we valued our tenants, and our Investors in People success has demonstrated our commitment to staff. I believe we have always looked ahead and tried to do the best we can."*

Tony runs the maintenance contracts that keep our homes in good order, dealing with the contractors responsible for external decorations, window and door replacements, grounds maintenance and corporate buildings.



"We still have an in-house plumbing and gas team, and our partnership contracts in these other areas have worked really well, particularly on larger contracts. I believe our tenants' homes are being looked after to a high standard," he said.

One of the current challenges is looking after the extra 200 to 300 homes coming each year, together with the geographical spread that means we now look after homes right across Kent.

He said he believed West Kent's success was due to *"the people who work here and the fact that we involve residents in our decisions, even down to asking their views when we consider tenders from potential partners."*

And as for the choice made by tenants over the voluntary stock transfer in 1989, Tony was in no doubt. *"Saying yes was definitely the right decision."*

A hand onto the HOUSING LADDER

While shared ownership tends to be seen as a relative newcomer in the housing market, it's actually been around as long as West Kent.

Do-It-Yourself Shared Ownership, or DIYSO, was introduced 30 years ago, although the scheme operated rather differently to the one that is currently proving so popular.

Head of Home Ownership, Sophie Palmer explained that DIYSO allowed people to find a property and ask their local housing authority to support them with a shared ownership tenure.

Once the request was approved, the would-be homeowner would buy a share of the equity while the council or housing association bought the rest and charged the householder rent on that share.

Fast forward 30 years and shared ownership is a big part of West Kent's operation, with 36 sold in the first half of 2019, compared with 43 in the whole of 2018.

As well as providing people with a way of getting on to the housing ladder, shared ownership is vitally important in helping West Kent fund its housing programme. *"The roughly £2m raised by the sale of those 36 properties, will be reinvested in new homes,"* Sophie explained.

West Kent's initial DIYSO purchases were restricted to Sevenoaks, but following West Kent's expansion it



Customer Services timeline

has more than 600 shared ownership homes in Kent, with homeowners paying a mortgage on part of their home and paying rent on the rest.

Shared ownership is not just a great way for young people to get a foot on the ladder but is also used by couples who separate and find that their share of the house they used to own jointly is not enough to buy somewhere new.



**2013
April:**

Contact Centre created telephone, email and face-to-face contact channels available (face to face at Sevenoaks and Swanley office)

**2015
August:**

Customer desks opened at the Swanley Link for face-to-face (old office closed)



2016 December:

New website launched customers able to complete web forms for ASB, complaints and compliments, request a garage, apply for a mutual exchange and report a limited number of repairs through My West Kent



**2018
May:**

Web chat made available on our website

July:

Customers able to request tenant improvements through web forms on the website

SUPPORTING MANAGEMENT AND STAFF

West Kent's board plays a vital part in setting strategic direction, monitoring progress and ensuring West Kent achieves its goal of providing great homes in strong neighbourhoods.

Chairman Colin Wilby, who took on the role in 2014, said West Kent *"already had a very capable executive team and an equally capable workforce"*.

He said the board's job was to support the management and staff and provide leadership as well as ensuring West Kent operated within the required regulatory framework.

Having grown up in a council flat in London, Colin understands the valuable role played by social landlords and is determined to use his extensive business experience to support West Kent's ambitious aims.

"I have worked as a non-executive director in many different areas of public life and I am very keen to work with my fellow board members to help West Kent provide good homes, something that is so important for people," he said.



"While it has a valuable social purpose, West Kent also has to run like a business, which involves borrowing money, developing our staff and working within regulations. The board is here to help and guide but, while everything is currently running fairly smoothly we really can't be complacent."

The board sets long-term goals and has been the driver behind the current 3.5% growth target in support of the aim of reaching 10,000 homes by 2026.

"That level of growth is a board-generated ambition, but we know that the West Kent team is capable of delivering it," said Colin.

"I would like to congratulate everyone at West Kent for reaching this milestone and wish them well for the next 30 years. This includes our tenants, whom I would also like to thank for their support over the years."



A diverse board

Our youngest ever Board member is Meg Morvan, who joined at the end of 2018 at the age of just 20.

While she joined to give something back, she has found the experience very worthwhile.

"Everyone on the board is extremely welcoming, which has made the whole experience so enjoyable," said Meg, now 21.

"At first I found some aspects challenging, such as understanding the finance side of things, but

everybody was so eager to help that I was immediately offered a session to go over all the figures, which was incredibly useful."

"All my thoughts and questions are valued, and I feel my contribution is really appreciated."

"Having grown up in a West Kent property I have insight into all the amazing things West Kent does for the community, and how well it interacts with tenants and younger residents."

"One of the things I want to achieve by being on the board is making sure tenants are aware of all the opportunities and events that are available to them. I have experienced them first hand growing up, and know how brilliant they are."

On the anniversary, she said: *"I believe West Kent has been successful over the past 30 years because of its devotion to going above and beyond for its tenants, helping in any way it can and constantly checking to see what more it could be doing."*

Resident involvement through the years



Resident involvement has always been a priority for West Kent, and over the years we have recognised how important it is for resident involvement to evolve and change. Over the past 30 years it has evolved as a result of organisational, governmental and technological changes.

The Association of West Kent Tenants & Residents (AWKTR) and the Tenants' Consultative Committee (TCC) were West



Kent's first tenant led groups. Heather Brightwell, Communities Director said, ***"the work they did was instrumental in representing the interests of tenants and the creation of West Kent Extra, the charity arm of the organisation"***.

In 2011 the AWKTR dissolved but their work was continued through the TCC with formal groups, tenant representatives and mystery shoppers. These small groups of tenants acted as the voice of all West Kent tenants and worked well, with positive results.

Now, West Kent wants to make sure more tenants can contribute to the running of West Kent and the services you receive. The Resident Involvement team merged with Communications and Marketing in 2018 and are working collaboratively with tenants on various projects.

We have a variety of options for people with differing interests and time commitments:

- We have reintroduced the editorial panel for tenants to comment on articles that go into our Neighbourhood News magazine, to let us know what is important to them and what they want to see and how they want to see it.
- Resident workshops have been a great success and give residents the chance to influence key service changes, both at West Kent and the government.
- The set up of a new scrutiny group has given tenants an opportunity to conduct in depth reviews of services and topics of their choice with the support of staff.
- We're developing an online panel so that more of you can be involved. You will be able to respond to consultations, from the comfort of your own home.

We are flexible and will work around you - if you want to be involved, there's a way to share your opinion.

A HEART AND A PULSE

Despite her intention to retire later this year, Deborah, West Kent's Housing Director, has worked hard to ensure that she leaves a legacy that will ensure West Kent's values are embedded.

In the words of Genette Pinwill, Head of Tenancy Services, Deborah has given the organisation 'a heart and a pulse'

Outside West Kent, Deborah is instrumental in supporting Kent Housing Group to be the 'voice of housing in Kent' and mentoring the Kent Housing Options Group, making sure people needing housing are treated fairly.

Deborah believes that housing associations are not simply there to put a roof over peoples' heads, and has championed the work of the support teams since their inception many years ago. She often reminds her teams to "remember who we are here to house."

She has a wealth of knowledge and experience that she willingly shares with others. She continually strives to make West Kent homes a better place to live, and to provide the best services we can. She is loyal to her team, her colleagues and to the sector – she tirelessly champions housing associations and



the work they do, and is well known across Kent for the contribution she has made to improve the lives of tenants.

Joanne Frawley was mentored by Deborah while she was a Tenant Board Member at West Kent, she says:

"Deborah is an extraordinarily talented, dedicated and committed advocate of and to social housing.

She has always impressed me greatly with both her ability and knowledge of housing issues, but most of all her empathy and compassion.

Deborah was, and is, a great inspiration to me. She is always a person who you can rely on to give her time willingly when you are unsure or don't understand something, or just as a sounding board. You always know she'll give her honest opinion.

In my experience she is extremely respected by staff and tenants alike, and her expertise has been of immeasurable value."

Follow us on social media:

@West_Kent West Kent westkent.org



Celebrating 30 years in housing