

SPRING 2025

WestKent

Places to live. Space to grow.

Neighbourhood news



Read our
magazine
on the go!

Spring cleaning
tips

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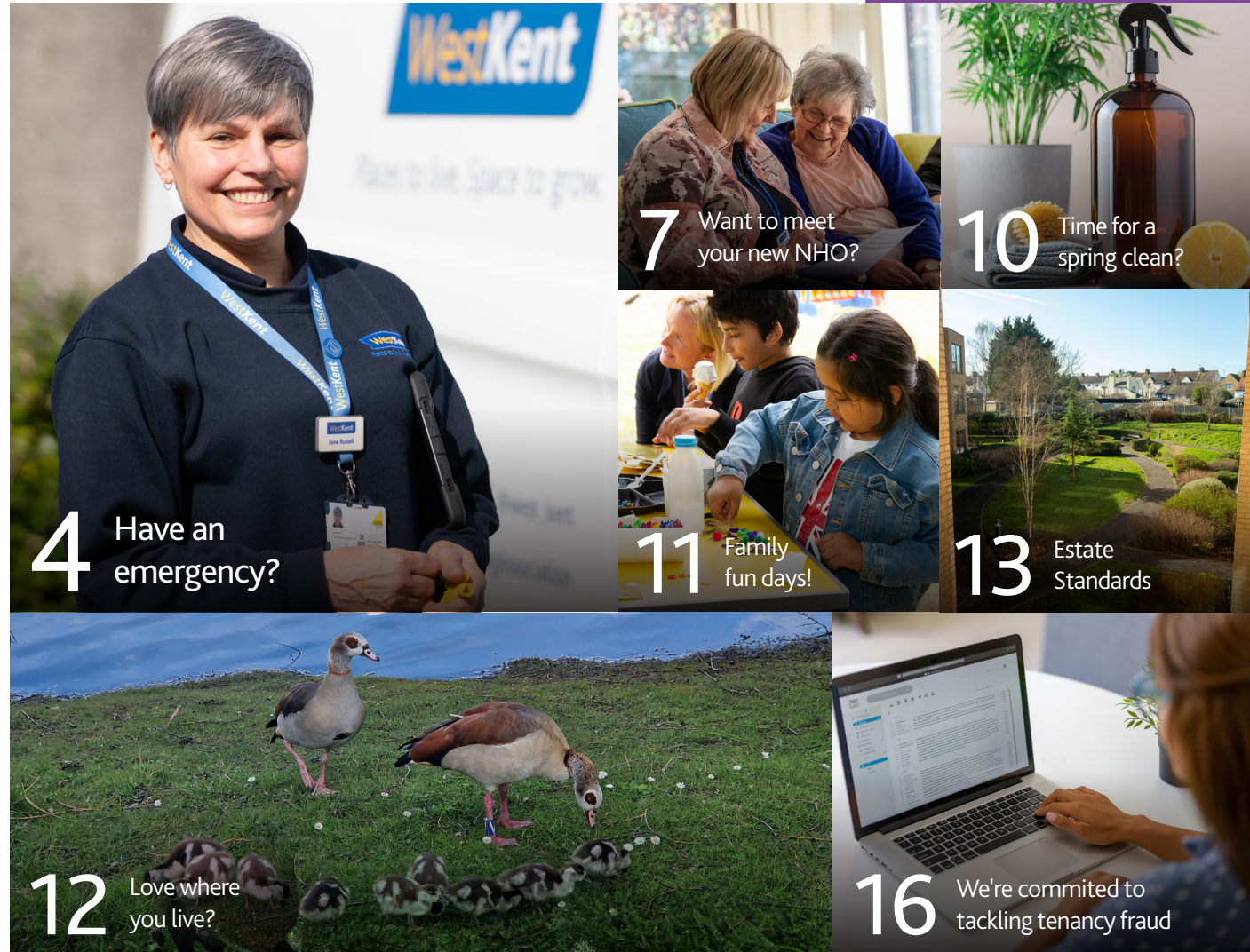
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Getting in touch

Customer services

Contact our customer service advisors to report a repair, get advice about finding a home or for any other housing related questions.

Email: help@wkha.org.uk
Phone: 01732 749400

Follow us on social media:

- Facebook: WestKentHA
- Instagram: westkenthousingassociation
- Twitter: @1WestKent

Welcome

to our spring edition of Neighbourhood News!

Welcome to this vibrant spring edition of Neighbourhood News, packed with content for our community. As the days lengthen and the urge to refresh our homes takes hold, we're delighted to offer you two valuable vouchers to help your budget go further and share a few spring-cleaning tips on page 10.

You'll also discover important information throughout the magazine, we take a first look at the new estate standards on page 13, and an update on the out-of-hours service on page 4, ensuring you know how to access support when you need it most. Plus, we have an insightful discussion (page 16) on tenancy fraud with our community safety team, addressing an important issue that affects us all.

This magazine is truly made by us, for us. The resident communications group have been working hard to create a platform that reflects our community, and we need your help to make it even better! Please let us know what stories you'd love to see.

What local gems should we shine a light on? What deserves to be celebrated? We want to hear from you! Your input is what makes Neighbourhood News a true reflection of our community.

On page 12 we are launching the 'what do you love about your community?' photo call. Share your snapshots and show us what makes your neighbourhood special. Read the lovely story on page 14 about how one of our neighbours found their forever home.

As you start enjoying the longer, brighter days, perhaps taking a stroll in the park, opening your windows to let in the fresh air, hunting for Easter eggs, or simply enjoying a cup of tea in the sunshine, take a moment to dive into this edition. We hope it brings you valuable information and inspiration as you embrace all that the season has to offer.

Warmest wishes,

Ian and the editorial team

Spring closure dates

We'll be closed:

- From 3pm on Thursday 17 April until 8.45am on Tuesday 22 April
- Monday 5 May
- Monday 26 May

If you have an emergency, please call 0800 169 1122.
You can find out more about our out of hours service on page 4.

Have an emergency?

All you need to know about our emergency out of hours service.

We provide an out of hours service, where we will respond to emergency situations during our usual closure times.

An emergency is any situation that poses an immediate risk to your health or security, or something that could cause serious damage to your home. For example:

- Gas leaks
- Severe plumbing issues, such as leaking pipes
- Electrical hazards
- Security concerns, such as broken doors or windows
- Fires (remember to call Kent Fire and Rescue first)
- Floods

What is the out of hours service?

If you have an emergency, call 0800 169 1122. The line is available 24 hours a day, whenever we're closed (for example, on an evening, at weekends and bank holidays).

We provide a 'make safe' service for emergencies. This means we'll provide a temporary fix in to make sure your home is safe and secure, such as draining or isolating leaking pipes or turning off electrical circuits. We'll then arrange a follow-up appointment during our usual open hours to return and carry out the full repair.

For a loss of heating, we'll repair where we can, but if we don't have the right parts, we'll provide you with temporary heaters and contact you once we reopen to arrange a full repair.

Non-emergency calls

Our out of hours service receives over 200 non-emergency calls each month. These significantly increase waiting times for those facing genuine emergencies.

If your situation is not an emergency, please contact us by phone during regular business hours to help us support those who need our help the most, as quickly as possible. You can:

- Email help@wkha.org.uk
- Visit www.westkent.org/contactus
- Call 01732 749400 during our usual office hours (8.45-4pm, Monday to Friday).



Annual rent review

In March, we wrote to each resident to let them know what their rent will be from April 2025 to March 2026. If you haven't received your letter, please get in touch. Email help@wkha.org.uk or call 01732 749400.

Extra care residents and residents on some other tenancies do not have rent catch-up weeks because their rent is calculated differently. If you pay by monthly direct debit, your payments will stay the same as the monthly amount is based on 48 weeks.

You can see more information about our rent-free weeks on our website www.westkent.org/rent.

Rent free weeks

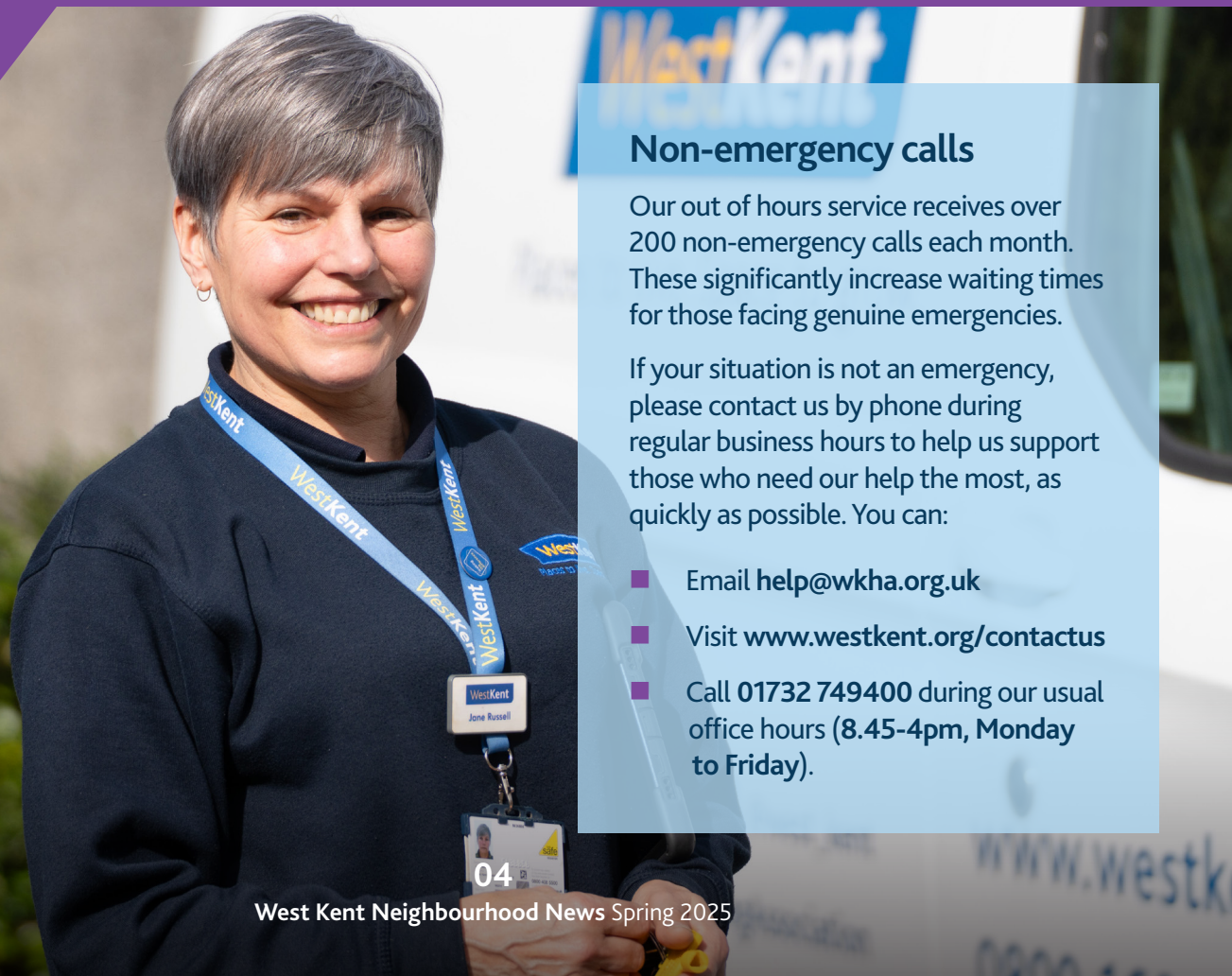
The rent-free weeks for 2025 are the weeks starting:

- | | |
|--|---|
|  7 April |  22 December |
|  14 April |  29 December |

If you owe us money, you must continue paying through the rent catch up weeks. If you're struggling to pay your rent or any other bills, please get in touch. We can help. Visit www.westkent.org/helpforyou, email help@wkha.org.uk or call 01732 749400.

Changes to our residents' annual report

Our residents' annual report has changed! It's now called the 'Residents' Influence and Impact Report' but will continue to share how we spend our money and how we've worked in our communities over the last year. The report will be available to read from the end of September on our website www.westkent.org/RIIR, and we'll have printed versions available across our schemes, communal areas and offices.



Neighbourhood Housing Officer changes

We've carried out a review of all our Neighbourhood Housing Officers (NHOs) and their patches. We've made some changes to make sure we're making the best use of their time to give residents support where they need it. NHOs manage any issues with your tenancy, such as succession or tenancy breaches. They complete estate inspections to ensure the neighbourhood you live in is maintained and work closely with our communities teams to support tenancy sustainment. We now also have dedicated staff members to manage our shared ownership and over 55s homes.

The new NHO patches are:	
Charcott, Bessels Green, Leigh, Penshurst, Fordcambe, Tonbridge, Tunbridge Wells, Westerham, Sundridge, Brasted, Riverhead and Dunton Green	Tony Bourne
Edenbridge, Cowden, Four Elms, Marsh Green, Hever, Ide Hill, Crockham Hill, Bough Beech and Chiddingstone	Gemma Garnier
Sevenoaks	Jennie Swoish
Kemsing, Seal, Otford, Shoreham, Eynsford, Halstead and Knockholt and Borough Green	Mike Perry
West Kingsdown	Kelly Youles
Maidstone, Allington, Snodland, Lenham, Wainscott, Hoo and Medway	Rebecca Curtis
Dartford, Bean, Ebbsfleet, Swanley, Farningham, Gravesend, South Darenth, Horton Kirby, Longfield, Hartley and Fawkham	Kelly Youles
Ashford, Canterbury, Ramsgate, Sandwich, Deal, Tenterden, Harrietsham, Headcorn, Rolvenden, Benenden, Hawkhurst, Faversham and Sittingbourne	Lisa Gilbert
Swanley White Oak	Tina Inkpen
Swanley St Mary's	Karen Hewett
Swanley Christchurch, Swanley villages (Crockenhill and Hextable)	Emma Smith
Over 55s homes and schemes:	
Cowden, Edenbridge, Penshurst, Fordcambe, Leigh, Weald, Brasted, Sevenoaks, Kemsing, Seal, Eynsford and West Kingsdown	Jane Hamblin
Crockenhill, Hextable, Swanley, South Darenth and Hartley	Ruth Cox
Shared ownership:	
Swanley, Fawkham, Longfield, Dartford, Ebbsfleet, Gravesend, St Werburgh (Hoo), Chatham, Rochester, Gillingham, Rainham, Sittingbourne and Maidstone	Zoe Everest
Sevenoaks, Westerham, Edenbridge, Tonbridge, Tunbridge Wells, Cranbrook, Rolvenden, Tenterden, Dover, Ashford, Willesborough, Harrietsham, Walmer, Broadstairs, Faversham, Canterbury, Sandwich, Deal, Margate and Ramsgate	Mark Connolly



Our NHOs will be carrying out tenancy audits this year, so please keep an eye out for an appointment. These are nothing to worry about; they'll check all is ok and update our records about who lives at your home and your contact info.

Want to meet your new NHO?



Swanley roadshow, 28 May:
10-11.30am at St Mary's
11.45am-1.15pm at Northview
2-3.30pm at Lullingstone Avenue.



Sevenoaks roadshow, 17 June:
10am-12noon at Hillingdon Park
1-3pm at Greatness Park.



Kemsing, 29 May:
10am-12 noon at the
Recreation Ground.



Edenbridge roadshow, 25 June:
10-11.30am at Spitals Cross
11.45am-1.15pm at Stonegrove
2-3.30pm at The Plat.

Hear from our resident communications group!

Have you ever wondered how you can have your voice heard and make a real impact in our community?

Do you want to help influence how information is shared with fellow residents?

Are you looking for a way to gain new skills whilst also making a difference?

Do you have an unfulfilled creative streak and looking for a rewarding way to express it?

If you've answered yes to any (or all!) of the above, then why not join our resident communications group?

We are a small, friendly group of residents from a variety of backgrounds. You don't need any special experience or qualifications, just a desire to help make West Kent's publications and communications as clear and relevant for residents as possible.

Meetings are designed to fit around your schedule, whether that's the school run or your job, and are mostly held online.

Iain (a current volunteer) says:

"To me, being part of this group is about bringing my everyday experiences and perspectives to the table. We meet regularly to discuss and review West Kent's communication materials. This can involve anything from looking at draft documents to discussing how information is presented online, on social media, videos, and in print."

"We believe that by working together, we can create communication that truly reflects the needs of our community."

So, if you would like to get involved with our friendly, welcoming group and make a lasting impact for fellow residents, then we'd love to hear from you!

What's in it for you?

- Learn new skills and boost your CV with marketing and communications training.
- Gain real-world experience working on newsletters, websites, and more.
- Help shape what goes into each issue of Neighbourhood News, perfect if you enjoy writing, design, or creative work.
- Receive vouchers as a thank-you for your time and contributions.



Iain, resident communications group member

New year, new hobby!

Feeling like it's time for a fresh start this season? Whether you're looking to meet new friends, discover a hidden talent, learn a new skill, or simply get a bit more active in our lovely community, joining a local group could be just the thing!

- The Buzy Beez craft group – get in touch for more information
- Swanley Gardening Group – this is a new group, so get in touch for more information.
- Join a Men's Shed – you can find your local shed by visiting www.menssheds.org.uk/find-a-shed

Are you part of a local group doing something fantastic? We'd love to shine a light on your activities in a future issue of Neighbourhood News! Get in touch and let us know what you're up to.

We're always supporting communities to set up new groups. If you have an idea or just want to find out more about our groups, contact our community development team by emailing communitydevelopment@wkha.org.uk or calling 01732 749400.

The Buzy Beez craft group



Time for a spring clean?

Spring has always been known for a time of renewal – the first signs of growth in a new year. This makes it the perfect time for a bit of good old spring cleaning!

Here's how you can make some cost-effective and eco-friendly cleaning sprays, that you can use all around your home!

All-round disinfecting cleaning spray:

Ingredients

- An old, empty spray bottle
- 0.25l white vinegar (about 35p a bottle in most supermarkets)
- 0.25l water (straight from the tap is fine!)
- Juice of one lemon
- Juice of one lime

Mirror and window cleaner:

Ingredients

- An old, empty spray bottle
- 125ml water
- 25ml white vinegar
- Juice from ½ lemon

Need a de-clutter?

Places like Facebook Marketplace and Vinted are great for selling your old, good-quality home items and clothing. You can also donate to charity shops, and places like Anglo Doorstep Collections will even come and collect from you, donating any profits to your chosen charity.

Abacus Furniture Project also collects donated furniture and electrical items free of charge. If you're looking to refurnish your home, we offer a **25% discount** to residents in receipt of Housing Benefit or the housing cost element of Universal Credit. For more information, email abacus@wkha.org.uk or call **01732 743365**.

Time to decorate?

We've partnered with Johnstone's Trade, to supply you with a selection of high quality paints and products to help you decorate your home, all with a **20% discount!** They have a whole range of colours, and stores across Kent.

Visit www.westkent.org/decorating for more info.

Community Repaint is also a great scheme, where you can purchase part and full containers of affordable leftover paint. You can also donate on your leftover usable paint for others! There's one at our Abacus Furniture Project in Sevenoaks, but you can find other schemes by visiting www.communityrepaint.org.uk.

Family fun days!

It might seem a bit early to talk about the summer holidays, but they'll be here before we know it!

We'll be attending free family fun days all over the Sevenoaks district, where you can take the whole family for some free fun activities. The fun days are in partnership with Sevenoaks District Council and run from 28 July to 22 August.

Dates and locations are still to be confirmed, so keep an eye on our website www.westkent.org.uk/events and our socials for more info!





Estate Standards

Over the last year, we've been working with residents to find out how we can improve the standard of their estates.

We consulted with over 600 residents across Kent by carrying out surveys, community events and door knocking, to get feedback on our current standards.

Residents told us that the most important things when it came to neighbourhoods were:

- Grass cutting
- Clearing paths and alleyways
- Cleaning and maintenance of flooring in blocks
- Dealing with fly tipping and disposing of waste.

That's why we've created a new set of estate standards. The standards clearly set out what you can expect from us and allows you to hold us and our contractors to account when things aren't going well.

We rate most of our estate standards as being one, two or three stars: three being the highest and one being the lowest rating. We've included pictures of what you can expect your neighbourhood to look like, along with some helpful information about each rating.

At each estate inspection, the Neighbourhood Housing Officer (NHO) will grade the services and ensure that standards are three stars when the service is delivered. We have also shared these standards with our contractors, so they are clear on our expectations.

We have also developed a Neighbourhood Management Policy, which sets out the services and activities we provide, how we will work with residents and local partners, and the responsibilities of residents. This policy was shaped by the Resident Scrutiny Panel.

A summary has been included in this magazine, and you can read the full standards on our website:

www.westkent.org/estatestandards.

Love where you live?

Last year, our community development team put together a Swanley calendar, full of photos residents had taken in their gardens and local area.

We'd love to see why you love your community or your garden – especially now the weather is improving, and the flowers are all in bloom. We might even feature you in a future edition of Neighbourhood News!

The picture above was taken by one of our residents and featured in our recent Swanley calendar.

VE 80

On 8 May 2025, we mark the 80th anniversary of VE Day. The UK will unite to celebrate 80 years of peace since the end of World War II in Europe.

The Early May Bank Holiday will be filled with community activities and events celebrating VE 80. If you're hosting or taking part in a street party or event, let us know! We'd love to hear about your celebrations and see lots of photos of the community coming together.

Email help@wkha.org.uk or send us a DM on Facebook!



Did you know?

Fly tipping was highlighted as one of the most important areas. So, we found a new contractor to ensure we could clear fly tipped items from our estates more quickly after they were reported.

The condition of bin stores was an important issue, so we have increased budgets next year so we can deep clean bin stores twice a year.

Hear from Luci, Community Development Officer for Edenbridge, about the recent BSL course in Edenbridge

"We have spent the past six weeks learning the basics of British Sign Language (BSL) with a mix of online and face-to-face sessions with Keith French, Deaf Community Worker at Kent County Council, as our tutor.



We have learnt how to finger-spell the alphabet, introduce ourselves, talk about our families and pets, hobbies and travel! Keith supplied us all with lots of resources so we can continue practising and learning even now the course has ended.

As always, we asked residents for feedback about the events and groups that we put on for them. Here's what one attendee had to say:

The course was great, really enlightening and extremely well delivered, with enthusiasm and creativity.

It was brilliant that we also learned the history and background of what 'deaf' really means. The informative delivery helped ensure social awareness of BSL which can lead to inclusion and acceptance of a relatively misunderstood disability.

We ended the final session by receiving our certificates and of course had to take a group photo!"

Do you want to learn BSL?

Below are the links for two websites which Keith recommends for people to use if they want to learn basic BSL at home:

BSL dictionary:
www.signbsl.com/sign/dictionary

BSL commanding hands:
www.commandinghands.co.uk

Len starts a new adventure in New Zealand!

After more than six years of waiting and planning, Len, our 101-year-old resident, has moved to New Zealand to be with his family.

Due to visa changes and COVID-19, Len's move was put on hold for several years. However, in 2023, one week before his 100th birthday, he was finally invited to express his interest in emigrating to New Zealand.

After completing the emigration application process, Len was recently deemed fit to fly and we are thrilled to share that he has now arrived safely in New Zealand with his family! He has met up with his extended family members, including his new great-grandchild, and is settling into his new home.

We wish Len the best of luck on his new adventure!



Supporting Stephen

Following the passing of his parents, Stephen, one of our residents, began struggling in silence, both emotionally and financially. His parents had been residents with us since the very beginning, having joined us with a protected tenancy from Sevenoaks District Council, and he had lived with them his whole life.

Stephen never had to deal with any administrative tasks while living with his parents and after their passing, several bills remained in his father's name and had built up debts.

Our Neighbourhood Housing Officers (NHOs) visited Stephen in August last year to explain how they could support him with managing the administration of his parents' passing and their tenancy. Our NHOs visited him frequently after the initial visit to check in and make sure he was managing ok by himself.

Stephen was not able to succeed the home he was living in, and our NHOs believed that a fresh start would be a good and positive step for Stephen. They made sure to be empathetic and careful with their words when speaking with Stephen as they understood that this was an incredibly stressful time for him, and it would be difficult for him to leave his family home.

As his new home was being arranged, our NHOs worked in partnership with Sevenoaks Council's HERO project to secure his benefits, set up payment plans and complete his Housing Register application.

After months of hard work, and emotional conversations, our NHOs received the great news that a one bed flat had been found for Stephen just a few doors down from his current home – meaning he could stay in an area which held so many special memories. He was elated with this news and was incredibly grateful that a new home so close to him had been found.

Stephen has made a great start on this new journey and is already doing several tasks by himself. Our NHOs are really proud of his progress!

Emma Smith, one of our NHOs, said:



This case turned into a significant piece of work that took several months and required a lot of teamwork, which ultimately ended with a very positive result for Stephen. Our dedication to our values was clear throughout this case and I am incredibly grateful to our Swanley NHO's for their contributions throughout Stephen's journey.



We're committed to tackling tenancy fraud

Tenancy fraud can deprive someone in genuine need of social housing, meaning that they may remain in temporary accommodation or being overcrowded for longer than they need to be.

What is tenancy fraud?

Tenancy fraud is when a resident misuses our property, by:

- Having a tenancy but living somewhere else (so not using their West Kent property as their main home)
- Subletting their property – for profit or not (this is fraud and you could be prosecuted for this)
- Leaving the property and allowing children to informally take over the home

There are other types of tenancy fraud, such as giving false information to get access to social housing and making a false application to succeed a tenancy.

What are we doing about tenancy fraud?

Over the last eight months, we've had over 50 allegations of tenancy fraud. Some of these reports have come from staff, but also from residents who believe that their neighbour is committing tenancy fraud. Following our investigations, we've managed to recover eight homes that can now be reallocated to those on the housing register. When an allegation is made, we will investigate by collecting information from our internal systems, our partner agencies, and information obtained from the National Anti-Fraud Network.

Once we believe we have enough evidence to support the allegation, we will conduct unannounced home visits and interview those involved. If we have sufficient evidence, we will either start legal action, encourage the resident to terminate their tenancy, or refer the case to the local authority for prosecution

How can I spot tenancy fraud?

Tenancy fraud can be quite difficult to spot. But you might want to look out for these signs:

- A sudden change in resident at the property.
- Your neighbour is being vague about who lives at the property or what their relationship is to those living there.
- Increased anti-social behaviour at the property.
- Your neighbour may have passed away and a friend or family member is now living at the property.
- The property appears to have been abandoned.

If you suspect that someone you know is committing tenancy fraud, let us know. We treat all reports confidentially and anonymously. You can contact us by:

- Visiting www.westkent.org/tenancyfraud
- Emailing help@wkha.org.uk
- Calling **01732 749400**
- Speaking to your Neighbourhood Housing Officer

