

NEIGHBOURHOOD NEWS

The magazine for residents of
West Kent Housing Association



Black History Month

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WestKent

Places to live. Space to grow.



WELCOME TO THE WINTER EDITION OF NEIGHBOURHOOD NEWS!

Christmas is just around the corner! It's an exciting time of year, and a chance to catch up with family, friends and neighbours and spread some good cheer!

We're ending the year with a real sense of pride in everything our residents and scrutiny panel have done to improve and shape our services in 2023. Read more on page 7. We've also included an early opportunity to get involved in 2024, and we hope as many of you as possible will share your views with us. Read more about what this is on the back page.

It's getting darker earlier and chilly in the evenings, and we know this will be hard on some of our residents – especially with energy prices still being high. There are lots of ways we, and your suppliers can help reduce the cost of heating and electricity, read more on page 10.

We hope you have a peaceful, safe, and happy Christmas and New Year with your nearest and dearest.

The editorial team

Remember, we're closed from 3pm on 22 December until 8.45am until Tuesday 2 January.



Places to live. Space to grow.
PROUD TO BE SUPPORTING
BLACK HISTORY MONTH

BLACK HISTORY MONTH 2023

– saluting Angela George for her commitment to resident involvement



Angela George is one of our resident board members and lives in Swanley with her family. Angela has over three decades of experience in resident involvement and shared her experiences with us as part of our Black History Month celebrations.

The theme for 2023 is 'Saluting our Sisters', highlighting the crucial role black women have played in social justice, shaping history, and inspiring change in the fields of literature, music, fashion, sport, business, politics, academia, social and health care, and more.

I moved to Swanley from London 36 years ago when I met my husband. At the time, there wasn't as diverse a community in Swanley as there is now and we were one of the first black families in the area. I didn't realise at the time what a rarity that was until I gave birth to my first child. One experience that sticks with me, is when friends and family visited from London taxi drivers automatically knew where they were going! Family and friends were always amazed by this, asking how I coped with being one of the only black people in the area.

My family and I educated lots of people both consciously and subconsciously by living and socialising in Swanley. Unfortunately, I encountered my fair share of racism from people in the area over the years. I'm glad to say that with time and through lots of interactions in the community, people's perceptions have changed for the better.

Over the years friends and family came to love visiting us in Swanley and many have now moved down from London to also call this their home. Thirty years on, Swanley is a much more diverse, vibrant, and welcoming community.

As a West Kent resident, I wanted to play a part in helping to shape how decisions were made.

Over the years I have been involved in many projects from community engagement activities, workshops and focus groups. I see volunteering my time back to West Kent as an investment in our community and the people who live in it. It enables me to help others in a selfless way and have a positive impact in the area I live as a parent.

I joined the scrutiny team back in 2011. Since then, have been involved in many different projects that have reviewed and suggested improvements to services, from defects handling to compliance processes.

In 2015, I joined the Board as a resident board member, and it has been an insightful and challenging experience. I am passionate about representing resident's views to the Board and Executive Team. I'm a firm believer in the ethos, "no decision about me without me".

Reflecting on Black History Month, I am incredibly proud that I worked with staff at West Kent to help develop the Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Strategy and chairing the forum that helped deliver it. Over the years I have been involved, it has been great to see the organisation grow to be an even more diverse and inclusive housing provider.

Black History Month is very personal to me because of the recognition in the UK to reconnect with black peoples' roots and to help support children and young people who are facing new and very real challenges. To me, it is about ensuring the next generation, regardless of the colour of their skin, or any of their protected characteristics can excel. It lets our children know the significant contributions that those with black heritage have made to British life and are still making.

Youth apprentices celebrate successful completion of two-year journey

Our youth services team carries out transformational work with children and young people across our communities.

The team currently includes two apprentices, Esther Esan and Hermione Hollman, who in September 2023, successfully completed their Level 3 Youth Work qualifications.

Hermione shared her thoughts on the apprenticeship, saying: *"I have loved every second of my time as a youth work apprentice, I have learnt so many different skills and can now take those skills with me to my next journey. This apprenticeship has opened so many more opportunities for me now. I have learnt so much about youth work, about young people and even learned new life skills. The team I have worked with were the best team I could ever imagine, and I am so thankful to every single one of them for all the support and help they have given me along the way. When I first started this course, I could just about string a sentence together, but along the way I have developed in confidence, social skills and many more and I am so grateful for all that the youth services team have done for me."*

Esther added: *"Working as a youth support worker has been a very eye-opening experience. I never thought that there could be so much to learn about the background of young people. I am especially grateful for all the amazing opportunities and people that I have met along the way. I will never forget my time here at West Kent."*

Esther and Hermione's accomplishment reflects their hard work and the support they received from the wider Youth Services team. Esther and Hermione will be moving on to pastures new from October and we wanted to wish them all the best in their future careers. Equipped with their new skills and experiences, they are ready to make meaningful contributions to the field of youth work.

For more information on our youth work, please visit www.westkent.org/youthservices



WE'RE WILDLIFE FRIENDLY!



We've been busy planting new wildlife hedges in Hillingdon Avenue, Sevenoaks.

110 saplings, generously donated from the Woodland Trust, were planted by student volunteers from Trinity School, Sevenoaks this November.

The project comes in partnership with Sevenoaks Town Council, who is looking to plant as many trees as possible, and Wild in 7Oaks, an organisation that supports local people to support wildlife in Sevenoaks.

Peggy-Sue Spurr, Head of Communities said: *"We're happy to have been involved in the tree-planting on our land today, not only does it create a much-needed habitat for wildlife such as birds and insects in the area, but also has the mutual benefit of preventing road noise for residents who live in our homes nearby."*

Cllr Tony Clayton, Town Councillor for Sevenoaks Eastern Ward added: *"I'm really glad West Kent stepped up to join the tree-planting initiative in Sevenoaks. We planted 700 trees in Sevenoaks last year and would like to plant even more this year, which means we need more people and more land to plant them on. So, thanks to West Kent for joining the programme."*

Four local residents have kindly agreed to look after the growing plants to ensure they grow well, with support from Wild in 7Oaks.

If you have an idea on how you can make better use of West Kent's land to improve the lives of residents and improve wildlife, email us! We'd love to hear your ideas.



Neighbourhood housing officers – keeping your home and neighbourhood safe

We're renaming our tenancy services officers this January.

Neighbourhood housing officers (previously called tenancy services officers) are here to make sure you have everything you need and complete visits throughout your tenancy to make sure you're happy in your home.

They also help with a range of issues, including:

- Making sure your neighbourhood is kept tidy and safe
- Anti-social behaviour
- Domestic abuse concerns.

Your neighbourhood housing officer will remain the same, it's just their job title that's changing.

Our neighbourhood housing officer patches recently changed, so to check who they are, visit www.westkent.org/nho. If you'd like to speak to

your neighbourhood housing officer about anything, you can:

- Email: help@wkha.org.uk
- Call: 01732 749400.

Our customer services team helps with all initial contact, so please give them as much information as possible to make sure your enquiry is dealt with as quickly as possible, and by the right person.



NEIGHBOURHOOD INSPECTIONS

Neighbourhood housing officers regularly visit the neighbourhoods they manage to ensure the area you live in is safe and being managed well.

Joining inspections will help neighbourhood housing officers get a better understanding of any issues in the area, and this will support them to resolve issues and make improvements. All you need to do is let us know you're coming along, and we'll let you know the meeting point and time.

These inspections are all about your local area and neighbourhood, so neighbourhood housing officers won't be able to discuss any individual tenant issues.

To find out when they'll next be in your area, visit our website www.westkent.org/nho, where we've included a list of all the inspection dates for 2024. If you'd prefer to speak to someone, call us on 01732 749400.



Resident involvement – what have we been up to?

We put residents at the heart of what we do. That's why we want you to share your ideas on how things could work better at West Kent.

There are lots of ways you can get involved and share your views. We regularly send out surveys to residents, but you can share what you think in other ways too. There are groups and panels to join, and we also have one-off projects and events. You can even get involved from the comfort of your own home with email consultations and virtual meetings.

Here's what we've been working on since our last magazine.

Your views: We ran several consultations over the summer. We asked you to help us review our rent letters, your opinions on our new disrepair and voids policies and asked residents with fixed term tenancies for some feedback. We have introduced a new area of the website where you can see what current consultations are open. Check it regularly to have your voice heard! You can see what happens to your feedback on your 'you said we did pages' It can take a while for changes based on your feedback to be made, but we update it as often as we can.

Find out how we're performing: We also have a new website area that tells you how we're performing and how we're making changes based on wider feedback and through complaints. Visit www.westkent.org/performance

Contractor standards representatives: We want to be transparent about the services we provide, so invite residents to attend meetings with West Kent staff and our contractors to check everything is meeting the standard it should. We currently have a resident representative attending strategic meetings with Brenwards (repairs and electrical) and have just recruited two residents to join iNHomes (gas and plumbing) meetings to give the views of residents.

Scrutiny panel: The scrutiny panel finished their review of how we hear the voice of residents, and you can read the full report and recommendations on our website www.westkent.org/scrutiny. Next, they will be reviewing our community safety service, with a focus on communication around anti-social behaviour.

Neighbourhood inspections: We know that your local community and neighbourhood is important to you. Our tenancy services officers regularly inspect areas to make a range of checks. We encourage residents to join them, and you can find out more about neighbourhood inspections on the back page.

That's our news, but what are your views? If you have questions, ideas or suggestions about how West Kent can improve things and how residents can be a part of that, about resident involvement, please get in touch!

- Email us: residentinvolvement@wkha.org.uk
- Call us 01732 749420



SPOTTING FALSE DISREPAIR COMPANIES

Our priority is making sure your home is as safe and well-maintained as possible. To do this, we need you to work with us and report repairs that we are responsible for.

We know there are several companies targeting residents across the country with false repair claim information. Many of these agencies are trying to scam you, will not follow the correct processes and could leave you out of pocket.

What do I need to do?

The best thing you can do if you need to report a repair, is contact us. We'll ensure we complete any maintenance and repairs as quickly as we can. To find out the full list of repairs we carry out along with our service standards, please visit our website, www.westkent.org/repairs.

There are several ways you can report repairs to us:

- Visit our website, www.westkent.org.uk
- Email help@wkha.org.uk
- Visit our tenant portal, My West Kent, www.westkent.org/mywestkent
- Call us on 01732 749400

When you report a repair to us, please provide as much detail as you can to help us identify the issue. If anyone in your household has any illnesses or vulnerabilities, let us know so we prioritise the repairs where they are needed the most.

Please ensure that we have up to date contact information, so we can contact you about the progress of your repair.

What if I don't feel my repair is being addressed?

We want to make sure you receive the right support at the right time, so please don't hesitate to contact us, even if the issue has already been reported.

If you feel that something that you are reporting has not been addressed appropriately you can:

- Contact our customer services team
- Speak to your scheme manager
- Submit a complaint.

We will investigate all complaints where you have told us the service was not acceptable and take action to resolve the matter.

We like to get our residents involved and welcome your feedback. We regularly monitor and report on our performance to ensure we deliver on our plans. The figures we report on are combined with our quarterly Tenant Satisfaction Measure (TSM) surveys to show us areas we're doing well and areas that may need more attention.

To read more about what we're doing with your feedback, check out our 'what we've done with your feedback' page on our website – www.westkent.org/performance.



WE'RE HERE TO HELP IF YOUR HOME HAS DAMP AND MOULD

We're taking reports of damp and mould very seriously and want you to let us know if you have it in your home.

What causes damp and mould?

Damp and mould is caused by condensation, which is when excess warm moisture in the air like steam or water vapour meets a cold surface and turns into water. Over time, this can cause patches of damp or mould to form. This can be more common in rooms with poor ventilation or insulation, which can make it more difficult to treat. There are often other factors at play in creating damp and mould, which is why it is important to investigate it as soon as possible.

How will I know if I have damp and mould in my home?

To help you spot this as early as possible, we have a dedicated page full of tips and advice. Visit www.westkent.org/dampandmould.

We've also developed a few short videos to help you spot and treat damp and mould. Check out our social media channels or visit www.youtube.com/1WestKent

How do I avoid damp and mould?

Here are a few of our key tips to reducing the risk of damp and mould developing in your home:

- If you can, keep your heating on low throughout in cold weather. Don't heat one room high while others are cold.
- Keep the doors of any unheated rooms open to allow some warmth in.
- Cook with pan lids on, turn down the heat to simmer and use as little water as possible.
- Run the cold water in your bath first, it reduces steam by up to 90%!
- Wipe down windows and sills daily.

If you have any concerns around damp and mould in your home, please contact our customer services team as soon as possible. Email help@wkha.org.uk or call 01732 749400.

We understand that the cost of living can contribute to damp and mould, and we're here to help. You can also access more information and support by visiting www.westkent.org/helpforyou.

UNACCEPTABLE BEHAVIOUR POLICY

We are proud of the open and honest relationship we have with our customers and work very hard to be proactive and responsive to customers' queries and/or complaints. However, there are times, where customers behave or act in ways that make it very difficult for us to provide an effective service.

That's why we've introduced our unacceptable behaviour policy, which was co-created with residents. It sets out how we expect our

customers to behave when dealing with us, what we believe is unacceptable, and how we will take action to protect the health and wellbeing of our staff.

Read our unacceptable behaviour policy on our website www.westkent.org/contactus



HELP FOR YOU

We're still here to support you if you're worried about the cost of living this winter.

The main thing you need to know is if you're worried about your rent, bills, energy costs or damp and mould in your home, you should contact us. We don't just provide a signposting service. We have teams dedicated to providing help, advice and financial support if you need it.

We've updated our website with lots of new information and guidance on what support is available if you're worried about food costs, energy, water, and a range of other household bills. For more information, visit www.westkent.org/helpforyou or call 01732 749400 to speak to a member of the team.

Remember: we have two rent-free weeks this Christmas, on 23 December and 1 January. If you pay by monthly direct debit, your payments will stay the same, as the monthly amount is based on 48 weeks.



HAVE A GAS APPOINTMENT WITH US? MAKE SURE YOU'RE IN!

It's our legal duty as your landlord to make sure the home you rent is safe. Part of our duty is to complete a gas safety check each year.

We know it's tempting to delay your annual gas check, you probably can think of at least a hundred better ways to spend that time, but please don't. The law is there to protect you. Faulty gas appliances – including gas standpipes – can cause carbon monoxide poisoning, explosions and death.

We have to check your gas every year, it's the law. If we can't do it in time, we cut off your gas supply and you will be without it until we can reschedule your appointment. You won't be a priority if you cancelled so it could be days before we reconnect you.

If you receive a letter from us for your annual gas check, plan to be there for it.

It doesn't have to be you who is in – just anyone over the age of 18 that you trust. This could be a friend, a neighbour or a relative. We can offer three appointment slots to suit you:

- 8am until 1pm
- 9.30am until 1pm (for those who have school runs to do)
- 1pm until 5pm.

In 2022, over a quarter of people were not home for their scheduled gas check appointments. This is equal to £87,000 worth of missed appointments, enough to completely replace 29 boilers, 22 bathrooms, or attend 1500 repair appointments.

Remember, you need at least £3 on your meter to complete the check. If you're worried you won't have this, or have other credit or debt issues, please speak to us. Email help@wkha.org.uk or call 01732 749400.

For more information about how we keep your home safe, visit www.westkent.org/safetychecks

HOME CONTENTS INSURANCE

Are you covered?

Home contents insurance is designed to help protect your possessions. No matter how careful you are, there's always a risk that your belongings could be broken, damaged or stolen, so home contents insurance can help provide peace of mind should the worst happen.

We've teamed up with Thistle Tenant Risks who provide specialist tenants' contents insurance policies. My Home Contents Insurance is a specialist insurance scheme provided by Thistle Tenant Risks and all tenants living in social and affordable housing are eligible to apply.

My Home Contents Insurance can offer you insurance for the contents of your home, including cover for items such as furniture, carpets, curtains, clothes, bedding, electrical items, jewellery, pictures and ornaments.

There are lots of home contents insurance providers out there though. So, shop around to make sure you get the best deal for everything in your home you need to cover – this includes anything you are responsible for, such as broken windows.

For more information, visit www.westkent.org/homeinsurance or call 01732 749400.



ESTATE SERVICES

– LET US KNOW WHAT YOU THINK!



We want our residents to be proud of the home and community where they live.

During 2024, we'll be reviewing our estate services, which includes grounds maintenance, communal cleaning, window cleaning and bin store management.

Our aim is to produce standards for each service, so you know for certain what work will be carried out, and when. To do this, we need to know what is important to you – what we do well, and what needs improving.

In 2024 we'll hold several consultation events across Kent, as well as online. Look out for more information on our website, social media channels, Residents Discussion Group on Facebook, and future editions of Neighbourhood News.



IN A HURRY?

HERE ARE THE BEST WAYS TO CONTACT US.



Email

You can email us about anything at help@wkha.org.uk.

When you email this address, you'll receive an auto-response confirming receipt of your email. We aim to provide a response to general enquiries by the end of the next working day. We will tell you if your response will longer and give you an estimated response time.

Website

You can complete our web form to get in touch with our customer services team. We aim to respond to online contact by the end of next working day. Visit www.westkent.org/contactus.

Social media

We hope you already follow us on our social media channels already! But you might not know you can send us a private message on Facebook with any enquiry. Just visit www.facebook.com/WestKentHA and click 'Message'.

Phone

We know some of our residents prefer to speak to someone over the phone, and that's absolutely fine with us!

You can call us on:

- 01732 749400
- 0800 169 1122 (freephone)

Where we are not able to answer your call quickly, we will provide you with a call back option whereby we will hold your place in the queue and phone you back when staff become available.

Call wait times are currently an average of 15 minutes, so if you can use one of our other methods to free up our customer services team to speak to those on the phone who really need it, please do.

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