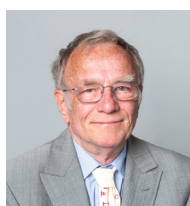




# WOKING@HOME

## DEAR RESIDENT



It's been several months since the council provided its tenants and leaseholders with a housing update, and I apologise for that, especially

because you will have seen and heard much about Woking Borough Council in the local and national media.

It has been a challenging time for the council. We have the highest level of debt in the country relative to our size, prompting the government to intervene in the running of the council. Our finance director was legally obliged to issue a Section 114 Notice declaring the council effectively bankrupt, and we've had to radically rethink and slim down the services we provide to be able to fulfil our statutory responsibilities.

It's been hard work, we've had to make difficult decisions, but I'm pleased to say that the council has an Improvement and Recovery Plan in place, and we are working well with government to overcome the challenges we face (more about this on page 2).

I welcome the renewed focus on core business, of which, providing decent homes most definitely is. For too long the council's focus has been elsewhere, and as a result, we've been failing to deliver the quality of service that is expected by you and the Regulator for Social Housing.

In December we were issued with a regulatory notice for breaching the Home Standard in respect of fire safety and we've had to put some rapid measures in place to mitigate the risks to your safety (see page 2) – not all of

which were warmly received but I thank you for your co-operation nonetheless.

As I said, it's been challenging, but we are making progress. The council will set a balanced budget in March, and I want to reassure you that there is no threat to the housing services we provide. Housing is a statutory local authority function and as such, the budget for housing and housing repairs, referred to as the Housing Revenue Account, is ringfenced and kept separate from all other council business.

As the following pages explain in more detail, next year we're increasing the general repairs budget by £600,000 to £3.8 million and plan to spend up to £16.8 million on our housing stock, focussing specifically on the high-risk fire safety remedial works which need to be carried out, and some outstanding Decent Homes Standard improvements.

The council knows it must do better when it comes to providing you with a safe, comfortable home, which leads me nicely onto the enclosed Tenant Satisfaction Survey. Your comments will help us understand where we need to focus our attention so that we can begin rebuilding your trust and confidence in the council and our housing service. **Tenants have until midnight on Sunday 24 March 2024 to complete their survey**, which can also be done online. Leaseholders, shared owners and tenants within our private sector leasehold schemes will be given the same opportunity later in the year.

Thank you for reading.

**Cllr Ian Johnson**  
Portfolio Holder for Housing  
Councillor for Mount Hermon

## USEFUL CONTACTS

General enquiries:

☎ 0300 373 0373 (24 hour)  
✉ [housing@woking.gov.uk](mailto:housing@woking.gov.uk)

To report a repair

☎ 0300 373 0373 (24 hour)  
✉ [housingrepairs@woking.gov.uk](mailto:housingrepairs@woking.gov.uk)

## NEWS IN BRIEF

### ALWAYS ASK FOR ID

**We work with a number of different contractors to look after you and your home.** If they require access to your property, we will always try to let you know in advance of them calling, and where possible schedule an appointment.

All contractors working on our behalf will carry an identification card, will arrive in branded vehicles and be wearing branded uniforms. You should always ask to see their identification card and perform these visual checks before you let them into your home. If you are in any doubt, please contact us immediately to check the purpose of their visit.

Call our housing team on **0300 373 0373 (choose option one).**

## REGULATORY NOTICE ISSUED BY REGULATOR FOR SOCIAL HOUSING

**In December, the Regulator for Social Housing issued Woking Borough Council with a regulatory notice for breaching the Home Standard in respect of fire safety. The regulator said the council had failed to comply with new carbon monoxide and smoke detector installation regulations and had a significant number of overdue fire safety remedial actions.**

In a statement, Cllr Ann-Marie Barker, Leader of the Council, said: "There is nothing more important than the safety of our residents. I would like to apologise, on behalf of the council, to our housing tenants for failing to deliver the quality of service that is expected.

"We undertook an extensive programme of fire risk assessments over the spring and summer which identified a significant number of remedial actions, and we are required by the regulator to get on and implement these as quickly as possible."

Since receiving the notice, the council has completed the following actions:

- Commissioned inspections of all properties where the council does not hold robust data on carbon monoxide and smoke detectors and resolved any issues identified.
- Undertaken specialist surveys on some housing blocks.
- Instructed a number of fire safety remedial works that are considered high risk.
- Surveyed all emergency lighting in housing blocks.
- Commenced loft compartmentation surveys, where required.
- Implemented quarterly fire door inspections to all four and five storey housing blocks and all temporary accommodation schemes with shared facilities.
- Introduced a sterile communal areas policy in housing blocks (more about this on page 3).



## BROCKHILL CLOSURE CONFIRMED

**In December the council begun consulting Brockhill tenants about the proposed closure of the extra care housing scheme in Goldsworth Park.** The building requires an urgent heating system upgrade and fire safety remedial works, which combined are estimated to cost £2.75 million over the next year. The total capital expenditure required over the next 10 years is estimated to be close to £5.8 million, which is considered unviable for a building of Brockhill's age and size, and no longer meets the standards required of an extra care facility.

As secure tenants, the remaining residents are being supported by the council and Surrey County Council Adult Social Care to move to suitable alternative accommodation. The package of support includes packing, removals, post redirection, advocacy, emotional support and compensation in the form of homeless payments and reasonable expenses. A number of moves have already taken place and these tenants are receiving support to adjust and settle into their new homes.

Officers have been focused on supporting the residents through this difficult period and no decision has been made regarding the long-term future of the Brockhill site.

## RENT INCREASE

**Your rent will go up by 7.7% from April 2024, which is in line with government guidance.**

We understand this is another increase at a time when all are feeling the effects of the cost-of-living crisis, but the council has a duty to improve your homes and the rent increase will contribute much

needed funds for this work.

Letters will be sent to all tenants week commencing 19 February to confirm the new rent and any changes to services charges due from 1 April 2024. If you have difficulty paying your rent, please contact us as soon as possible using the details provided on page 1.

## GOVERNMENT SUPPORT PACKAGE

**The Government has permitted a handful of financially challenged councils, like Woking, to increase their council tax charge above the cap to help them set a balanced budget in 2024/25.**

Subject to agreement by Full Council in March, the Woking Borough Council portion of your annual council tax bill is likely to increase by 10% in April 2024. This is an increase on the tax Woking Borough Council receives, not

a 10% increase on the whole amount. The majority of what you pay goes to Surrey County Council and the Police and Crime Commissioner for Surrey.

It is a legal requirement for residents to pay council tax. If you are concerned about how to pay your bill, you must contact us as soon as possible so that we can help you put a plan in place. Call **01483 755855** or tell us online at **woking.gov.uk/counciltax**

# REPAIRS UPDATE

## MAJOR INVESTMENT IN OUR HOUSING STOCK

Since the housing service returned in-house in April 2022, it has become clear that the council's housing stock is in a poor condition and requires significant capital investment.

The council has agreed a capital budget of up to £16.8 million for 2024/25 which will focus on the

high-risk fire safety remedial works, along with some outstanding Decent Homes Standard improvements.

This will mark a significant upscaling of the Housing capital programme, which will be primarily funded from rental income, capital receipts and disposal of a small number of void properties.

## PREVENTING DAMP AND MOULD

The main cause of damp and mould is too much moisture in the air.

Here are six tips to bring down the humidity in your home:

- 1. Heating:** Try to keep your home warm with a low background heat of at least 18°C, and open windows or doors to unused rooms frequently to circulate the air.
- 2. Drying clothes:** Where possible dry clothes outside. Avoid drying clothes on radiators. Use a clothes airer in a room where a window can be opened, or an extractor or dehumidifier is on.
- 3. Cooking:** Put lids on pans while cooking, close connecting doors, open a window and/or use the extractor fan.



- 4. Bathing:** Use extractor fans where fitted and close connecting doors. After a bath or shower, open the window to let the air circulate and use a squeegee to remove excess water from tiles and shower screens.
- 5. Windows:** Air your home by opening windows when possible. Leave trickle vents open and wipe away condensation on windows.
- 6. Furniture:** Leave a small gap between furniture and outside walls. Avoid putting mattresses directly on the floor as air needs to circulate underneath and declutter rooms to improve air flow.

## THE LEGAL DEFINITION OF A DECENT HOME

Four criteria that make up the Decent Homes Standard:

- a)** It meets the current statutory minimum standard for housing.
- b)** It is in a reasonable state of repair.
- c)** It has reasonably modern facilities and services.
- d)** It provides a reasonable degree of thermal comfort.

## A BOOST FOR BOILER REPAIRS

In November we appointed heating specialist contractor, **Smith and Byford**, to work alongside **Mountjoy**. Their focus is specifically to improve and maintain communal and domestic heating systems and they have already made a good start on tackling some of our more complex sites.

## KEEP CLEAR AND CARRY ON

**Fires are rare but can have devastating and even fatal consequences.**

It's therefore vitally important to keep communal areas, balconies and outside space clear of items that could:

- obstruct fire evacuation routes
- be a trip hazard during an evacuation
- cause a fire to start or spread.

As your landlord, we are responsible for your fire safety and the safety of everyone in your building. We know the introduction of our sterile communal area policy represents a significant change for some residents and we thank you for your continued cooperation.

**More actions you can take now to protect you and your home:**

- Use designated drying areas, not balconies, for airing and drying clothes and bed sheets.
- Never use portable heaters to dry laundry.
- Test your smoke alarms weekly.
- Know what to do in the event of a fire. Check the safety notice for your building which will have specific instructions for your building.
- Anything with a battery cell, module or pack should be stored inside your flat. If left in communal areas, they pose a risk to everyone in the building.

Please report any fire safety concerns, or items stored in communal areas, to us by calling **0300 373 0373** (choose option one) or emailing **housingfiresafety@woking.gov.uk**



## SMOKE, CARBON MONOXIDE, AND ELECTRICAL TESTING

**We have contracted NRT to carry out a programme of smoke, carbon monoxide, and electrical testing.**

The electrical test needs to be carried out every five years and if you are contacted by a member of the NRT team, please allow them access to your property as this is a requirement of your tenancy.

There are a number of homes where we consider the smoke and carbon monoxide detectors need to be checked and NRT have been instructed to complete this work by then end of June 2024. Again, if you are contacted by NRT please ensure access is provided. If issues are identified,



NRT can fit or replace the required detection during their visit to ensure your home is as safe as possible and to the required standards.

## MOUNTJOY TO CONTINUE AS MAINTENANCE PROVIDER

**We are pleased to confirm that Mountjoy will continue to work with the council to deliver a responsive maintenance and repairs service until March 2025, and possibly beyond until March 2029.** Both parties are committed to partnership working to deliver a more responsive and reliable service for tenants and leaseholders. Since sharing an office space, communication between both sides has improved and there has been a significant reduction in customer complaints – with none received in December.

## NEW HOMES UPDATE

### A NEW PLAN FOR SHEERWATER

The council has agreed a new plan for the regeneration of Sheerwater which is smaller and more affordable. Thamesway will complete the three residential phases currently under construction but won't start any further project phases. Instead, the council will begin a programme of refurbishment, including bringing around 50 empty homes back into

use, which will be retained by the council for social housing.

This rolling programme of refurbishment works will be funded by capital receipts from property disposals and the sale of land currently occupied by the blocks of flats along Dartmouth Avenue, Devonshire Avenue, Forsyth Path, Loder Close and Spencer Close.

### 13 FAMILIES MOVE INTO THE REEDS

One of the Sheerwater project phases under construction called The Reeds (or Copper phase), is already home to 13 families who occupy the four two-bedroom and nine three-bedroom properties available for affordable rent from Thamesway. These highly energy efficient, modern homes each come with rear gardens and allocated parking.

## RESIDENT ENGAGEMENT

### BECOME AN INVOLVED TENANT OR LEASEHOLDER

We want our tenants and leaseholders to feel valued, listened to, and confident that we're acting on the views of residents. We also want to give you the opportunity to gain CV experience, be part of a community and influence the services we provide.

There are many ways to get involved from participating in focus groups, leading events and activities, reviewing and scrutinising draft

proposals, and keeping tenants and leaseholders informed of service changes and initiatives. If you are interested in volunteering and want to help us improve our services, please email [resident.engagement@woking.gov.uk](mailto:resident.engagement@woking.gov.uk) to find out more.

Your email will be answered by Rosalynn Funnell, who joined the council at the beginning of February as our new Resident Engagement Team Leader.

