



OPEN HOUSE

The newsletter for Croydon Council tenants and leaseholders

SUMMER 2021

Going back to basics

Some of you may have heard about the findings of an independent report (ARK) following serious service failings at some flats in Regina Road, South Norwood which led to some tenants having to live with regular water leaks and damp.

It made a series of recommendations which should prevent a similar situation arising elsewhere in the borough.

One of the recommendations in the report was about improving the way we communicate with our residents. We quickly got the ball rolling by setting up a team of officers to talk to residents at Regina Road to find out about any problems they've been experiencing within their homes and liaise with the relevant services to make improvements. Gary Fantie, a resident involvement officer in the council's housing department along with officers in our tenancy, community development and repairs teams, spent the past few weeks engaging with residents on the estate.

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Welcome to your latest edition of Open House



I'm glad to be able to write to you in my first edition of Open House magazine since becoming the council's cabinet member for homes.

I got into local politics because I wanted to make a positive difference for my local community, and the same is true now that I oversee how we support residents in our council homes.

At the heart of this is the basic principle of improving your housing experiences and making sure you all feel listened to, respected and supported.

Too often, though, for all the tenants that have a good experience from us, sadly others feel ignored and helpless. This must change, and I'm determined that it will.

You may have heard that a few months ago we had to move some residents out of a Regina Road block because their homes were in a terrible state. While we have fixed the problem and found them somewhere suitable to live, we have begun a fundamental rethink of our housing services.

What this means for you is a major series of long-term improvements, from customer service and complaint handling to communal cleaning and how we get you involved.

We've started by asking residents to share their concerns, whether that's face-to-face on door knocks, on online meetings with Regina Road residents, by letter or in my casework. This is partly to resolve any issues as quickly as possible, and partly so our plan reflects what matters to you.

A crucial part of this is getting a full picture of what long-term repairs are needed across all 26 high-rise blocks, and detailed surveys have begun on the first seven.

This edition of Open House includes a welcome message from Dr Alison Knight below, who is also new in post to lead these housing improvements, which include an exciting new board where tenants from all walks of life will examine how we are doing.

Like most boroughs, Croydon has a severe problem of demand for properties totally outweighing supply. However, tackling overcrowding is one of my priorities and we are looking at ways of reducing this problem. This includes offering cash incentives so tenants who no longer need a large council home can downsize and a family in need can move in instead, and this has happened 27 times this year.

Staff are constantly looking for more homes to add to our Croydon Choice lettings website, so it's definitely worth you bidding regularly. We are also looking at providing more homes for families in temporary accommodation, and will have an update on this in the autumn.

Finally, if you have outstanding issues, get in touch via My Account or, if you feel you aren't getting anywhere, email me at patricia.hay-justice@croydon.gov.uk and we can work on finding a solution.

I promise to keep you informed and if I can help in any way, please don't hesitate to get in touch.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Patricia Hay-Justice". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Cllr Patricia Hay-Justice
Cabinet member for homes

Introducing Dr Alison Knight – Interim Executive Director of Housing

Providing good-quality council homes is really important to me, and I joined Croydon almost two months ago because I want to make sure that you, our residents, get a much better housing service.

Most importantly, it's about making sure council residents really feel listened to, respected and know their concerns will be acted on properly.

We are doing a lot to improve the overall service you get as our council residents – both on short-term issues and long-term changes.

One area of focus is customer service and we will be introducing more training and ensure we recruit to key vacant posts which is one of the recommendations in the ARK report.

I know we have many excellent people - not least because you tell us yourselves, and we need to make sure we encourage good practice. For example, the other day we were sent a lovely message from a young woman, thanking her tenancy officer for helping her very ill mother in one of our blocks. This sort of example is great and we want to recognise staff who are pulling out all the stops to help residents.

We're improving the way we analyse our repairs data to spot trends and act sooner. This means we can better identify where to focus our efforts and spending, including in our high-rises.

We are also setting up a Housing Board that will be there to oversee the work we are doing as part of our Housing Improvement Plan. This Board will include residents so you can share your experiences and take an active part in reshaping the service. We hope this will be launched from September and will include community groups, housing specialists and council representatives.

In the same spirit, we are creating tenant focus groups to feed back on customer service, and housing officers are visiting around 40 blocks across the borough, talking to residents on the doorstep to find out about any issues you're experiencing and how we can help. For more information about the Housing Improvement Board, the focus groups or the engagement events, email: residentinvolvement@croydon.gov.uk



We have made a good start on making lasting improvements and have a lot still to do, but we want to make sure you all see a real difference in the housing services we provide.

Dr Alison Knight, interim executive director for housing

Going back to basics Continued...

Gary told us; "We hope that our presence on the estate has helped to give tenants a voice and a chance to give their opinion about what is or isn't working. We know that many of the issues and problems they're experiencing on the block have been ongoing for some time so we needed to understand what's been happening. The best way of doing that is by talking to our residents face-to-face and seeing the problems for ourselves."

We've really enjoyed engaging with our residents face-to-face again. Finding out how they feel about their environment, unresolved issues and working with services to help them resolve those issues really is our bread and butter. You get so much out of a conversation and

building those relationships with our residents is so important to creating trust.

A bigger team is going to be completing a similar exercise at a number of estates and blocks across the borough over coming weeks and months to find out about your experiences as a Croydon Council tenant or leaseholder. We're looking forward to talking to our residents, finding out what's happening and where we can help".

For dates and locations of the engagement events, visit: www.croydon.gov.uk/housing/information-council-tenants/resident-engagement-events

For dates and locations of Back to Basics roadshow, visit: www.croydon.gov.uk/

[residentinvolvement](mailto:residentinvolvement@croydon.gov.uk). These events will be ongoing so don't worry if you don't see your block or estate is not on this initial list. If you and your neighbours would like to arrange for us to visit you, just email residentinvolvement@croydon.gov.uk or call **07881 677 489** and we'll organise it.

To read the ARK report and the council's Housing Improvement Plan that's been created in response, visit www.croydon.gov.uk/housing/information-council-tenants/housing-improvement-programme We'll provide regular updates about how we're delivering the plan and ways you can get involved on this web page and in future editions of Open House over the coming months.

YOUR VOICE MATTERS

Have you ever wanted to give feedback - positive or negative - about your housing services or do so on behalf of a relative, neighbour or friend and not known where to start?

There are a number of different ways to have your say, give feedback or get involved on a short or long-term basis as a council tenant, leaseholder or freeholder. Involvement can be as simple as a one-off piece of feedback, an idea about how we might do things differently or something more involved such as becoming one of our Neighbourhood Voices and reporting on waste collection services, fly-tipping, communal repairs, caretaking and grounds maintenance.

You could join council officers on an estate walkabout - a great way to flag any issues affecting communal areas such as green spaces. You could become one of our mystery shoppers, where you get to 'test' our services, tell us what we did well and work with us on how we could make improvements.

You could join one of our resident panels - all of which have been held online over the past 18 months - or if you don't have time to attend meetings, you can

still get involved by doing a quick survey or a one-off focus group looking at a specific service.

We offer all the training and resources you need and cover any reasonable costs - like travel and childcare. We also offer translation services for those who would otherwise struggle to participate.

Getting involved not only helps to improve council housing services for yourself and others, but also you get free training, can improve your IT, office and literacy skills or get a reference for your CV.



Les Parry, South Norwood council tenant (pictured)

"I totally recommend anyone that's a council tenant or leaseholder to get involved in working with the council to improve housing services. For over two years now I've been involved in a number of different panels and am now part of the performance monitoring, health & safety, scrutiny, tenant & leaseholder and, more recently, complaint panels.

As an involved resident, I'm able to speak directly with managers of housing services about issues that I or other residents are experiencing. I also review how services are performing and can propose changes to improve things. I was recently involved in a scrutiny exercise which examined how long it takes to turn empty homes (voids) around so that they are ready for new tenants to move in. It is an enjoyable and interesting role and gives you the opportunity to discuss issues directly with council managers."

LOVE WHERE YOU LIVE – BE A NEIGHBOURHOOD VOICE!

Do you have 20 – 30 minutes to spare each month to help us to monitor the housing services you receive from the council? Why not join a growing group of residents and become one of our 'Neighbourhood Voices'.

Our neighbourhood voices are tenants or leaseholders from across the borough who carry out short monthly inspections of their blocks and immediate surrounding areas. They report their findings back to us by completing a short easy-to-complete paper or online form and we liaise with relevant housing services to resolve any issues you've raised.

opportunity to report any ongoing issues with things like waste collection services, fly-tipping, communal repairs, caretaking and grounds maintenance. We will provide you with all of the information and training. All our neighbourhood voices are entered into a prize draw every four months to win a £25 shopping voucher. We'll also keep you updated about how your input has helped to improve services.

If you're interested and would like further information about getting involved, contact the resident involvement team on **07881 677 489** or residentinvolvement@croydon.gov.uk.

Turn to page 6 to find out why Jill Arboine, one of our neighbourhood voices, told us why she gets involved.

A NEW CHARTER FOR ALL TENANTS

Earlier this year the Government introduced a new charter with an aim of improving housing services for all council and housing association tenants. The Grenfell fire tragedy highlighted a number of failures including the way the landlord engaged with residents, listened to, and acted on their concerns. As a result the Government has introduced a Charter for Social Housing. This sets out the actions it will take to ensure tenants are safe, are listened to, live in good quality homes and are able to take action when things go wrong.

There are seven areas:

- **To be safe in your home.** We will work with industry and landlords to ensure every home is safe and secure.
- **To know how your landlord is performing,** including on repairs, complaints and safety, and how it spends its money, so you can hold it to account.
- **To have your complaints dealt with promptly and fairly,** with access to a strong Ombudsman who will give you swift and fair redress when needed.
- **To be treated with respect,** backed by a strong consumer regulator and improved consumer standards for tenants.
- **To have your voice heard by your landlord,** for example through regular meetings, scrutiny panels or being on its board. The government will provide help, if you want it, to give you the tools to ensure your landlord listens.
- **To have a good quality home and neighbourhood to live in,** with your landlord keeping your home in good repair.
- **To be supported to take your first step to home ownership,** so it is a ladder to other opportunities, should your circumstances allow.

The government is working with the Housing Regulator, the Housing Ombudsman, the Health & Safety Board and residents' groups to make all this happen. It will



be consulting all stakeholders and most importantly, tenants on its future proposals.

Some aspects will require new legislation and the implementation of new regulations, so it may be a while before changes are introduced. However, here in Croydon we are already working with residents to improve the way we engage with you, handle your complaints and keep your home safe and in good repair.

Check out page 4 to find out about some of the ways you can work with other residents, councillors and officers to and share your experience of your housing services. You can also

email: residentinvolvement@croydon.gov.uk or call **07881 677 489** for a chat with one of our resident involvement officers.

SAFE AS HOUSES

PASSIONATE ABOUT HEALTH AND SAFETY?

Could you be on our health and safety panel? This group has been set up to make it easier for residents living in council homes to get their voices heard if they or their neighbours have safety concerns within their homes or buildings. This is a lively and committed group and we're looking for new members to join, especially council tenants and leaseholders living in mid- or low-rise blocks. If you are interested in getting involved, please contact: residentinvolvement@croydon.gov.uk or ring Katherine Monk on: **07309 733 705.**

MY NEIGHBOURHOOD VOICE

"I got involved with the scheme to monitor the caretaking service where I live and make sure it kept to a good standard. Being involved means that I am able to tell the council if there's a problem. The managers respond to my concerns and help to resolve things. I have been lucky that my caretakers give an excellent service."

Jill Arboine, our neighbourhood voice in West Croydon.



The heat is on - naturally

New energy-efficient ground source heating at three Croydon housing sites in New Addington, Upper Norwood and Broad Green will be completed this autumn.

Ground source heat pumps are a much cheaper way of heating homes, they reduce carbon dioxide emissions and energy costs for our residents and help to improve air quality. The heat pump works by extracting the natural heat stored more than 200 feet beneath the ground and piping it into residents' homes, reducing heating bills by around £100 a year. 77 households have had their old heating replaced, with the remaining 50 to be completed over the next couple of months.

Croydon's energy efficiency and improvement works at a 10-storey New Addington block in Chertsey Crescent are nearing completion. These energy efficiency measures include insulation, cladding, new windows and the installation of ground source heat pumps. Other improvement works include roof renewal lift upgrade, new windows and main entrance doors.



We don't want anything to stop you from getting involved. That's why we cover travel, childcare and carers costs and make sure that the venues and facilities we use are accessible to everyone. We can provide British Sign Language interpreters or other translation support if needed.

Contact us residentinvolvement@croydon.gov.uk. 'Like' our Facebook page to keep up to date with the latest news and views. Visit www.facebook.com/croydonresidentinvolvement. More information at www.croydon.gov.uk/residentinvolvement

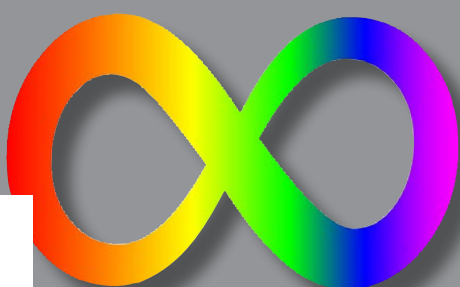
AUTISM FRIENDLY PLAN FOR CROYDON

A new council plan to help improve the lives of people with autism has been developed.

It's based on the feedback of 500 residents with autism or people close to someone with autism. It is estimated that Croydon has between 8,000 – 11,000 residents with autism. Working together with the Autism Partnership Board (APB), a list of priorities has been put forward:

- Providing suitable accommodation for people with autism
- Supporting children with autism and their families
- Making buildings and public spaces as autism-friendly as possible
- Providing education and training for people with autism in an autism-friendly environment
- Raising awareness and understanding of autism throughout Croydon.

If you are a person with autism, or a parent or carer, you are welcome to join one of the council's working groups to help determine what services for people with autism will look like in future. For more details contact Kevin Oakhill, autism social inclusion lead, at: kevin.oakhill@croydon.gov.uk



Council tenant's **home contents insurance** scheme

Did you know that the contents of your home are not insured if they are damaged?

Thistle Tenant Risks offer specialist tenant contents insurance covering contents of your home, including cover for items such as furniture, carpets, curtains, clothes, bedding, electrical items, jewellery, pictures and ornaments. All tenants living in social and affordable housing are eligible to apply.

We work with a major insurer to offer home contents insurance that can be paid in weekly instalments. Unlike some insurances, on this scheme, exclusively for our customers, there are no excesses – so nothing to pay in the event of a claim.

- no excess (you don't pay the first part of the claim)
- covers theft, water damage, fire and many more household risks
- covers tenant's improvements (up to £2000)
- covers contents in sheds, outbuildings and garages (up to £2000)
- covers damage to external glazing for which you are responsible



- covers replacement and installation of locks for outside doors or windows and alarms, if keys are lost or stolen
- you don't need to have special door or window locks
- all postcodes are included

The cover is subject to the terms, conditions, limitations and exclusions contained in the policy. For more information visit www.croydon.gov.uk/housing/information-council-tenants/home-contents-insurance. or email: housingrentaccounting@croydon.gov.uk for a policy booklet to be sent to you.

UPDATE: improving your housing services

A lot has been done at Regina Road and across the borough over the past couple of months under the council plan to give all council residents a better housing service. Officers have met over 200 Regina Road residents face-to-face to discuss any concerns they have, and written to those we haven't been able to speak to. The council has also found new homes for households in urgent need. We have also brought in surveyors who have started a programme of detailed inspections at all 26 council high-rises across the borough, including those at Regina Road, to help the council plan future upgrades to residents' homes. We have also provided contact details for the tenancy officer, other useful housing services and caretaking schedules for Regina Road to make it easier for residents to talk to us when there's a problem. We

have held two online meetings with residents and are looking forward to a larger face-to-face meeting with residents over the coming weeks now that Covid-19 restrictions have been lifted.

Across the borough, over 2500 repairs have been completed since April and we're now making good headway through a backlog following Covid-19. Over the coming months we will be listening to many more residents about their experience of our housing services and this feedback will help us to understand what we need to change. Contact residentinvolvement@croydon.gov.uk if you would like to share your experience or get involved in improving or monitoring services.

TOP TIPS TO CUT COSTS WHEN ENERGY HIKES HIT THIS AUTUMN

Energy prices will rise for millions of people across the UK in October, following an announcement by energy regulator Ofgem that the energy price cap on some deals is increasing by £139 per year.

A household that uses a medium amount of gas and electricity can expect their bill to increase by around £139 per year, which is around £11.60 extra per month. For a household paying by prepayment and using the same amount of energy, bills may increase by £153. The exact amount extra you'll have to pay depends on how much power you use. These are still things you can do to help stop your bill rising this autumn.

- Avoid the incoming price hike by switching away from an out-of-contract or default tariff.
- If you're on a standard variable tariff (set at the price cap), you may be able to reduce your bills by switching to a fixed tariff which guarantees the same price (per unit of energy) for a set period of time.
- If you receive working age means tested benefit, you may be able to apply to get £140 off your electricity bill under the Warm Home Discount Scheme. The money is not paid to you - it's a one-off discount on your electricity bill, between October and March. You may be able to get the discount on your gas bill instead if your supplier provides you with both gas and electricity. Contact your supplier to find out. The discount will not affect cold weather payments or winter fuel payments. The scheme opens on 18 October 2021, visit www.gov.uk/the-warm-discount-scheme for details.

- If you're struggling to pay your bill or top up your meter, talk to your energy supplier as soon as possible. They must treat customers fairly and agree a payment plan with you that you can afford.

Besides switching to a cheaper deal, try these tips to keep your bills in check:

- Opt for paperless energy bills and manage your account online (some companies charge extra for paper bills)
- Pay by direct debit. You can be charged more – even if you're protected by the price cap – for paying when you get a bill or by prepayment.
- Get a smart meter installed or send regular meter readings to make sure your bills are accurate.
- Replace light bulbs with energy-saving ones when they blow. They're much cheaper to run
- Don't leave gadgets on standby when you're not using them.

For information about local and regional schemes to help you reduce your fuel bills visit www.croydon.gov.uk/environment/sustainable-development/energy/domestic-energy-advice.



HELP MAKE SURE RACE AND EQUALITY MATTER IN CROYDON

Residents are invited to share their views by completing a survey on the proposed Croydon Race Matters Pledge and Croydon Equalities Pledge. The pledges are a pioneering series of commitments which aim to make Croydon free from racism as well as a safer, fairer and more inclusive borough for all. The council has worked with

community groups, the police, youth groups and schools to develop the pledges and is now asking residents across the borough for their views.

Once finalised the pledges will be launched to Croydon residents, businesses, organisations and groups to sign up and commit to by, for instance, implementing fair and impartial

recruitment processes, equality and diversity training for staff on unconscious bias, anti-racism and cultural awareness, reviewing the diversity of an organisation's workforce, and sharing good practice. The aim is to launch the pledges to coincide with Black History Month in October. To take part visit: <https://forms.office.com/r/58jR8JK2fV>