

UNDER ONE ROOF



GETTING ENGAGED

We are delighted to introduce Marcia Cunnison who has joined us in the important role of customer engagement officer.

Marcia's role at Nehemiah involves encouraging and supporting you and other tenants to get involved in helping us to improve services and develop solutions to problems together.

Marcia has a strong customer focus gained from many years working in customer services and quality management, including for a large waste management company and a private housebuilder.

With her skills and background, Marcia knows how to work with people to build communication, flush out problems and make things happen!

Marcia works closely with our housing officers and other staff. She is also keen to develop closer partnerships with community organisations to benefit you. As a Member Pioneer at the Co-op she is already using her community network to develop key partnerships with local charities, such as Everyone Prosper in Wolverhampton. Read more on page 2.

"I want to help bring a positive impact on the people we serve," says Marcia. "We have signed up to the Together with Tenants charter, setting out what you can expect from us as your landlord. I'm excited about our plans to spark ideas and strengthen the impact of these commitments." She adds: "I'm looking forward to meeting more of you in person and to arranging plenty more engagement activities."

You can get in touch with Marcia now - please see page 8 for details.



STAR BAKER

When Marcia isn't busy in her housing role, she can often be found singing in her church choir - or in the kitchen baking a showstopper!

Marcia is a talented cake maker. She enjoys the creative side of decorating the cakes, usually made to order for special requests.

She also donates cakes to raise money for charitable causes, including a recent 'star bake' to support the mental health support work of ACCI (The African Caribbean Community Initiative).

REACH OUT

Tenants have benefited from our recent link-up with Wolverhampton-based community charity Everyone Prosper.

Marcia, our customer engagement officer, heard about the charity's caring work to reach out and support people in need of basic items and community kindness.

She got in touch with Narinder Kaur, the founder of Everyone Prosper, to make some plans.

At Christmas, the charity generously donated gift bags to young families at our Seacole Court supported family scheme.

Most recently, the charity's volunteers visited residents at Shanti Niketan retirement scheme and gifted culturally-sensitive food and clothing.

They gave a wellbeing talk in Punjabi relating to diabetes and everyone enjoyed the chance to meet and socialise. Further visits are planned.

Everyone Prosper was set up over 20 years ago when Narinder visited India as a teenager and began donating food to homeless children there. Back in Wolverhampton and training to be a midwife, Narinder could see the need within her local community too.

The charity has expanded with volunteers and supporters and now gives out 250 food parcels each fortnight.

"We will help anyone we can," says Narinder. "After all, hunger doesn't discriminate, and neither does social isolation. We try to act as agents for change."

We look forward to working further with this compassionate and energetic local charity. Follow them on **Facebook @everyoneprosper**



THANKS TOM



Tom Murtha, a well-respected champion of social housing and a Nehemiah board member, has stepped down from his work with housing associations after an amazing 46 years.

Tom joined our management board three years ago. But the connection goes back much further as Tom was involved in the setting up of Nehemiah in the 1980s.

After retiring from his distinguished career in housing, Tom dedicated his services to a number of boards. During his time with Nehemiah, we have benefited from his wisdom, leadership and passion for housing and equality.

It was a privilege that Tom should make our February board his last meeting in the social housing world.

His parting words to us were about the importance of staying true to the purpose of social housing and serving tenants: "Never forget why we are here."

We wish Tom many more happy years ahead, with time now to enjoy other interests and family life.

GOLD STANDARD

Our staff are the greatest resource in making sure we deliver the best housing services to you.

During the pandemic we continued to invest in the engagement, development and training of our people.

So we are delighted to have achieved the highly-rated Investors in People gold accreditation. Less than an fifth of accredited organisations achieve this gold standard.

We are now continuing our journey to further improve in key areas to benefit our staff and residents.



NEW GROWTH

A tree was planted at Nehemiah Court in Walsall for the Queen's Green Canopy scheme to 'Plant A Tree For The Jubilee'.

The planting was part of celebrations to mark our £1 million refurbishment of the retirement scheme's communal areas and a new two-storey extension.

Tenants and their guests were joined by Walsall South MP Valerie Vaz for the tree planting followed by afternoon tea.

Four new apartments have been added as part of the improvements. They also include a new lift, mobility scooter room, extra lighting and improved car parking.

The result is fully refreshed surroundings for residents and more affordable homes for independent or assisted-care living.

If you or someone you know is interested in moving to Nehemiah Court, please get in touch.



SKIP TO IT

When you enjoy being hands-on, the work of a multi-trade apprentice can be right up your street.

That's why 22-year-old Bradley Andrews from Walsall jumped at the chance of getting his ideal job.

His two-year apprenticeship is with our repairs contractor Axis, offered as part of our contract with them. It means Bradley is developing his skills while training with the Axis team working on Nehemiah homes.

"I love it," he says. "I've worked as a labourer in the past and then as a bins collector on a zero-hours contract. So it's great to be settled in a job with great prospects, especially as my girlfriend and I have a baby on the way!"

Axis is supporting us too by helping tenants to dispose of clutter and bulky items and deal with any unsightly fly-tipping.

'Skip day' events will see skips handily located for local tenants to use. The first events took place at Hurstbourne Crescent in Wolverhampton and Bordesley Court in Birmingham.



BRAND NEW



We're excited to be building 21 new homes near Vine Street in Brierley Hill, Dudley. The project is our first new-build development in recent times.

The two and three bedroom houses are due to be ready by early summer.

They have been built within a wider new housing scheme and as part of our longstanding partnership with Midland Heart housing association.

The homes will be let to local people through Dudley Council's housing register. Know a family in housing need? Call us for more information on applying.

RENT MATTERS

Rents are due to go up from April 2022. Thank you to the many tenants who joined us for the early evening online tenants' meeting about this increase.

You gave us thoughtful feedback with your clear, honest and constructive views. Similar meetings on other topics – including repairs and anti-social behaviour – will follow soon.

You will have received a letter from us giving details of your new rent amount. You might still feel unsure or have some questions. So we hope the information here is helpful.

How much will my rent increase?

Your rent will go up by 4.1 % from 4 April 2022. This compares to several years of having a 1% rent cut, followed by a rent increase of 2.7% in 2020 and 1.5% last year. It still means that our rents are significantly lower than in the private sector.

How is my rent set?

We are a social housing landlord. Our rents are set according to government guidelines to be affordable. The rules allow us to increase your rent by the Consumer Price Index (CPI) plus 1%. (The CPI figure used is 3.1%, a snapshot taken in September 2021 and before its further rise).



What do you spend my rent on?

Rents are our main source of income. We spend it on paying back the cost of building your home and maintaining it. A shortfall in our income from rent means we have less to spend on repairs, improvements and new homes.



Do you have to increase my rent?

We know that any increase to your rent is not what you want to hear, especially after the difficult times of the pandemic and the rising cost of living.

But we, along with many other housing associations, have given it careful thought, including whether we could put up rents by less than the maximum allowed. It's a fine balance. But we have decided that we need to make the full increase.

This is because we are faced with rising costs for services and supplies, especially for property and repairs. We need the money we receive from rents to continue to contribute to providing our housing services and the significant investment required to improve the energy efficiency of homes.

If we left the rent as it is, something would have to give. We do not think it would be sensible or fair to under-invest in your homes. We are not prepared to risk becoming financially insecure due to poor management. Instead, we want to be able to look after you well and plan for future generations of your friends and family who choose to live in our homes.





I pay service charges, so will the same increase apply?

Service charges for shared facilities, like communal lifts or lighting, may increase for some tenants but the amount is worked out in a different way. These charges are calculated to cover the cost of providing the services. The cost is split between all the residents who may use them. Full details of your service charge are given in our letter to you about the rent increase.

What do I do if I can't afford the increase?

Our priority is to support tenants to sustain their tenancies. We want to avoid you getting into rent arrears. Our housing officers can help and also refer you to Birmingham Settlement for specialist money and debt advice. Please take advantage of this service now to help you manage the rent increase.

What if I refuse to pay?

Although a few tenants might consider not paying, most tenants decide against it. They know it will result in rent arrears building up and in us having to take action to recover the unpaid rent due. We want to avoid this unnecessary situation as it can lead to you facing more debt and only make your finances worse.

I claim Universal Credit; will I have to re-apply and face delays?

No, you do not have to make a new claim. You simply need to go onto the portal for the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to give them the new rent amount when it starts. It is important that you tell them this on or soon after 4 April 2022 as we will be asked by DWP to confirm the increase.

If you then find your Universal Credit is not increased to cover the rent change, you should promptly speak to your housing officer.

I pay my rent by Direct Debit; what do I need to do?

Your Direct Debit will be changed automatically by our finance team – you don't have to do anything.

Where can I get debt and budgeting advice?

No matter where you live, your housing officer can refer you to Birmingham Settlement which specialises in giving money advice to anyone with financial worries. They can act as your advocate in assessing and prioritising your debts and can also help you maximise your income. Support is also available from your local Citizens Advice.

What happens next?

All the details of the rent increase are in our letter to you. If you have not received this, please let us know quickly.

If you do not accept the proposed new rent you can refer it to the Rent Assessment Committee. It may agree the new rent, or tell us to reduce or even increase it.



POCKET ADVICE

If you are struggling to pay your rent, it's important that you talk to us. As our housing officer William Hughes says: "It's not just about collecting rent; we're here to help you."

Every situation is different so we'll work with you to find a solution. We could, for example, agree an affordable payment plan or flexibly adjust one already in place.

There might be benefits available to increase your income – or perhaps problems to sort out in claiming. Recently we worked with a tenant in danger of losing his home to help him get his housing benefit returned after it was suspended.

And no matter where you live, we can arrange for you to get free and impartial advice from money specialists at Birmingham Settlement.

For example, a Nehemiah tenant was relieved to share his worries with an advisor. He was helped to apply for a Discretionary Housing Payment to ease his debt, and also gain support from Age UK.

Help can come in unexpected ways too, as Nehemiah tenant Doreen found out when she discovered fraudulent activity on her bank account.



"Money had gone and I was broke," remembers Doreen. "At that moment, the bank couldn't help me and I didn't have an overdraft. So I called Nehemiah and my housing officer was absolutely fantastic. I had money in my rent account so I was offered an urgent repayment to tide me over. I got it very quickly; it was such a relief."

The emergency help was possible because Doreen had built up credit on her rent account by paying a small extra amount each week for a few years. This can certainly help when facing a difficult situation money wise.

YOU SAID, WE DID

Listening to you helps us to improve our services. So we're keen for you to tell us if there is something you think we could provide or do differently.

Sometimes there will be things we can't do. But we will always try to respond to your suggestions and let you know if we can't do as you would like.

Here are some examples of what we've done recently as a result of what you've said at tenant meetings or in other conversations.

- Organised extra housing officer surgery visits at McCalla House and Shanti Niketan in Wolverhampton.

- Fitted showers as a standard feature in all new bathroom refurbishments so that over time all homes will have showers.
- Found ways to convert some electrical-only properties to more efficient heating systems.
- Introduced more estate 'walkabouts' by housing officers and repairs staff to visit you and talk about any neighbourhood issue or concern.
- Enabled staff to have more opportunities to listen and spend time with young parents at our supported family scheme.



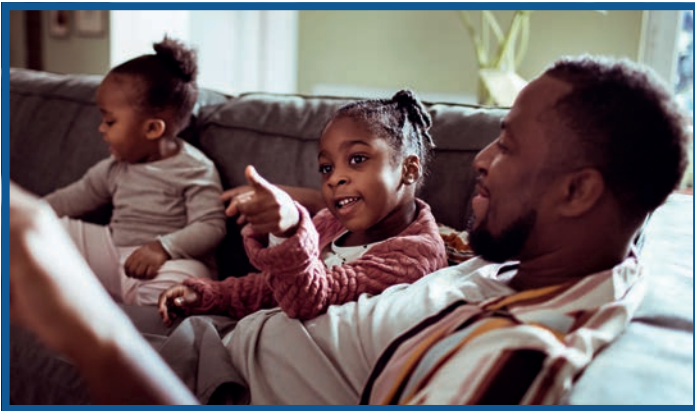
SAVING ENERGY

Energy prices are rising, and we know you might be worried about how this will affect you.

Having a home that is energy-efficient can make a big difference to your energy bills.

On top of the repairs you report for fixing, we have a constant programme of planned improvements. Over the past year we've invested £1 million in home energy upgrades such as new heating systems, windows and doors.

By doing more of this work, along with loft and wall insulation, we plan to give all our homes an energy performance certificate (EPC) of a 'C' rating or above. This is higher than the current national average for energy efficiency.



Small steps make a big difference too. Here are a few budget-friendly ways to try.

Check your heating

You'll spend more on energy if your heating system doesn't work or isn't set up properly.

So keep your servicing appointments. If your heating breaks down, let us know so we can fix it quickly so you don't need to use portable electric heaters, which cost more.

Ask us if you're not sure about how your system works. Or visit the Energy Saving Trust website at: www.energysavingtrust.org.uk/energy-at-home/heating-your-home/

Keep it constant

Keep heating on a low constant temperature during the day, even when you're out. Don't turn it off completely or rooms may become damp.

Make sure your furniture isn't right up against your radiators. It will block the heat.

Close the gap

Cracks, gaps and cold snaps do not mix well. Keep warmth in by fixing draught excluders to areas like the bottom of doors and letterboxes.

Close the curtains when it's getting dark. Tuck them in behind the radiator to keep heat in the room.

BETTER SAFE

Safeguarding means protecting your right to live in safety, free from abuse, harm or neglect.

Working together with other agencies, we are alert to spotting the signs of risk and the ways to stop it happening. In the past several months we've supported 28 tenants facing harm from others or to themselves.

For example, we've helped a tenant experiencing domestic abuse to get support from a trained worker and, in another case, a tenant has been helped to deal with hoarding.

If you're worried about a fellow Nehemiah resident, you can tell us in confidence so your friend or neighbour receives the help they need.

We will investigate your concerns in line with our own safeguarding policy.

There may be times when you need support yourself. You can contact us for advice, and we'll talk to you about your situation and how best to help.

Speak to your housing officer or scheme manager. Or get in touch with our housing service manager and safeguarding lead, Pamela Farquharson. If you think someone is in immediate danger, you should always dial 999.



ALL RIGHT

We always try to give you the best service we can. Yet we know sometimes things go wrong. If it does, please talk to us so we can try to put it right.

For example, two tenants spoke to us about faulty storage heaters not being fixed. Once we knew of the problem we were able to arrange for the heaters to be promptly replaced. "First class - you now have two very happy tenants!" was their reaction.

If after raising the issue or request with us there is still a problem, we have a straightforward complaints process to resolve it.

We'll acknowledge your complaint within 5 working days of receiving it and get straight on with investigating what's happened. We'll let you know the outcome within 10 working days.

If you remain unhappy, you can ask for it to be reviewed at a second stage by a senior manager. They will reply to you within 20 working days. If on rare occasions we need more time to reply, we'll tell you.



Most problems are easily sorted out in this way. Each month we speak to tenants with a recent complaint to check they are satisfied with the solution. We only close the matter when they are.

OVER THE MOON

Our new housing assistant Chanelle Matthews is proof that work placements can really help in finding the right career path.

The 21-year-old joined us last autumn as a paid trainee through the Kickstart scheme.

"I had found myself jobless after a few years working at McDonalds and then doing some bar work," explains Chanelle. "I knew I wanted to work with people, and ideally help impact lives, but wasn't sure in what area."

At the job centre Chanelle was told about our Kickstart work placement and she was successfully interviewed. "It was really exciting to be working in an office and gaining administrative experience in housing," she recalls.

The placement was for 6 months but Chanelle

never finished it - because a permanent position came up and she grabbed it with both hands!

"I was happy with what I was doing but then to get the permanent role, well, I was over the moon. I even cried as my manager told me!"

Chanelle's job involves supporting the housing team with all aspects of work, including letting properties, taking rent payments and helping tenants move through mutual exchange.

She works alongside Marilyn Gray, who has also moved into a permanent role as a housing assistant after temping with us last summer.

Marilyn has a wealth of administrative experience, mostly recently gained in property development.

