

# UNDER ONE ROOF

British Journal of Photography



Photographed by Anthony Luvera

## BEING SEEN

**If this striking portrait of a woman in a red dress looks familiar, you'd be right.**

It's displayed on bus stops and other digital advertising screens nationwide as a winning image in the Portrait of Britain photography award, celebrating the diverse faces of modern Britain.

"Everything about my life is in that picture," says Nehemiah tenant Mauvette Reynolds. "The red dress is a cry for help. To be seen, to be heard, on those streets where I was homeless."

Mauvette's self-portrait was taken with help of photographic artist Anthony Luvera. They met at SIFA Fireside, a local charity supporting people experiencing homelessness.

"I'm a creative person and wanted to try photography," remembers Mauvette. "Being homeless - sofa surfing, sharing houses of multiple occupation, living on the streets - I felt isolated and misunderstood. Exploring photography with Anthony's help was uplifting. I chose the location and how I presented myself."

Mauvette's picture featured in a Birmingham exhibition shining light on the issue of homelessness. Now it has the recognition of the British Journal of Photography in its Portrait of Britain award.

"Anthony is a great supporter, giving me motivation and courage. When over coffee one day he told me that my portrait's latest success meant it was on billboards and in a book, it was a dream come true!" beams Mauvette. "I feel so proud. It shows you can still be the person you want to be, whatever your situation."



## EXPRESS IT

**Mauvette now lives in a Nehemiah property in Birmingham. Alongside her interest in photography, she enjoys painting and writing stories and poems.**

She performs with The Choir with No Name, a joyful singing community with homeless and marginalised people. Currently, she's involved in a project with Geese Theatre inspired by fairytales and participants' lived experiences.

"It takes time to recover from the trauma of homelessness," she explains. "It's therapeutic to have creative interests to express myself."

# GOOD TO TALK

Our new housing officer Kirsten Clarke is already building a great connection with tenants.



Covering homes in Birmingham, Kirsten is enjoying getting to know many of you over the phone and in person including on 'walkabout' estate visits.

"I get a lot of satisfaction from working alongside tenants to solve issues they may be facing," says Kirsten. Kirsten's working life began in customer service at Asda. She went on to gain experience as a support worker and housing officer. Most recently she was a property manager at The Housing Network, which supports vulnerable people.

"There is no shame in asking for support if you need it," says Kirsten. "For example, it can be hard to manage your finances at times, especially if your income is low or fluctuates. As a team we understand that. Our aim is to support your efforts to keep your tenancy and enjoy living in your home. We do this through things like checking what benefits you might be entitled to, helping you to budget or deal with debt, or to settle any neighbour disputes."

It always helps to talk, believes Kirsten. "For example, I recently visited a tenant who was trying to avoid facing her rent arrears and possible court action. She'd ignored opportunities to respond and was in a panic. It took that visit for her accept we are on her side in trying to resolve the problem. Together we agreed a payment plan she can afford, which is beneficial to her and to us. I know it must be a huge weight off her mind."

# LET'S HEAR IT

**The search is on for up to 10 tenants from all walks of life to join our newly-launched Tenant Scrutiny Panel.**

Meeting at least four times a year, the panel offers the chance to work with other tenants to monitor and influence how we perform as a landlord.

Panel members will choose housing services to investigate and make recommendations for further improvements.

"As the people experiencing our services, tenants are the best people to judge how well we're doing," says Marcia Cunnison, our customer engagement officer.

"Sometimes the smallest changes have the biggest impact – and it's these issues that staff and board members can easily miss. We need your voice!"

Panel members will receive support and training, and have their expenses covered. Get in touch with Marcia to find out more. Her details are on page 4.



# COFFEE MATTERS



**A whopping £1,383 was raised for Macmillan Cancer Support at coffee morning events held at five of our retirement living schemes and at head office.**

That's enough to pay for a Macmillan nurse for a week – as well as run the charity's Online Community Forum for three hours and pay for a person affected by cancer to attend a wellbeing event!

Tenants generously gave almost two-thirds of the money raised. The remainder came from Nehemiah staff whose contribution was matched by a donation from Nehemiah itself.

A big thank you to everyone who got involved.

# MOULD ALERT

**Condensation in the home can usually be wiped away. But if mould sets in, we won't let you live with the problem.**

Please report damp or mould to us promptly so action can be taken to get rid of it.

We will remove the mould from walls and ceilings. We'll then identify what's causing the damp and put a plan in place to stop it returning. This might involve repairs or specialist advice.

Together we will tackle the problem.

# MAKING PLANS

**Samuel Daley knows what it's like to have a busy, well-loved home.**

The father of four boys, aged four and under, has recently joined Nehemiah as a property services trainee.

In recent weeks he's visited over 140 homes to carry out checks, known as a stock condition survey.

This looks at a selection of our properties to examine the condition and energy efficiency of various parts, including windows, bathrooms, roof tiles and gutters.

"It gives us the all-important information we need to plan and budget for improvements," explains Samuel. "There's also the

benefit of being able to pick up on any repair issues there and then."

The survey takes about 30 to 45 minutes. "It helps that more tenants work at home nowadays. Plus, most people are very good about letting me know if they can't be home so it's easy to rearrange the appointment."

Bringing his experience of meter reading at E.ON, and of getting drivers and their vehicles back on the road while working at the AA, Samuel is enjoying developing his technical knowledge and communication skills at Nehemiah. "I'm a people person so I love the interaction with tenants and



learning from my work colleagues," he says. "It motivates me to be better every day."

When he's not working, Samuel enjoys precious time with his big, young family – and being a big Villa supporter!

# RENT MATTERS

**Rents go up from April 2024 by 7.7%.**

We understand the impact of this, especially with the continuing cost-of-living crisis and from the thoughtful feedback of tenants who joined our rents review online meeting.

All of this was carefully considered in reaching the difficult decision about this year's increase.

As a registered social housing landlord, we set our rents in line with a government formula to be affordable. Rents are our main

source of income. They are only increased by the amount needed to keep homes in a good condition and for us to remain as a financially viable landlord.

Although inflation is now falling, costs are still going up. Our biggest expense is the repair and maintenance of homes, where shortages of labour and materials are expected to cause price rises of 7.7%. Plus, new legal requirements are adding to improvement costs needed to keep homes safe and warm.

Service charges, paid by tenants with shared facilities such as communal grounds, are also being updated. These charges simply cover the cost of the services, and also impacted by inflation.

You will have received a letter with details of your rent and any service charges. Please let your housing officer or scheme manager know if you have concerns. We're here to assist, including offering you free help with money worries from independent advisors at Birmingham Settlement.

# MASTER IT

**You will soon be able to use the Nehemiah website to request repairs and track their progress.**

Other new functions on the improved customer portal include being able to set up and amend rent payments and give feedback on services.

The exciting improvements are a result of us moving to a new housing management IT system called HomeMaster.

This is automating many routine tasks for staff, enabling them to

spend less time on admin and more time on using their skills to look after tenants' needs.

Look out for the website's new features going live this summer. If you currently use the existing customer portal you will be sent new login details. All other tenants will be invited to set up an account.

We hope as many of you as possible will make use of these new features giving you greater flexibility and control.



# STREET DANCE

Nehemiah tenants were part of a flash mob dance routine in Birmingham city centre, organised by the charity The Active Wellbeing Society.

The 'Break The Chain' dance expressed the energy and message of 'One Billion Rising', a global activist movement to end violence against women and girls. Its name comes from the alarming statistic that 1 in 3 women – that's over a billion worldwide – will be beaten or raped during her lifetime.

Organisers thanked all those who danced or cheered to help raise awareness about tackling this issue.



## LESSONS LEARNT

**Complaints are an opportunity for us to put something right. They're also a chance to learn.**

We regularly audit complaints to identify where we can learn lessons to improve. Here are some recent examples.

**Lesson:** Well-equipped staff give better support to tenants with poor mental health or high vulnerability.

**Action:** Further training for staff on responding to challenging situations.

**Lesson:** Regular updates to tenants reduces the need for complaints about antisocial behaviour (ASB).

**Action:** Ensure staff handling ASB cases routinely use the policy and procedure in place to keep tenants informed of progress.

**Lesson:** Staff working alone in an unpredictable situation are at risk.

**Action:** Have two members of staff present to increase safety and reduce risk.

**Lesson:** There are misunderstandings about rent refunds and the need for at least one week's credit to be on the account.

**Action:** Staff to explain and provide written information about rent refunds to tenants.



## GREAT OR LATE?



**Through our telephone survey, you give us helpful feedback on our repairs service.**

The survey is carried out by independent researchers, Acuity, on a sample of repair jobs. It means that within a few weeks of a repair being done, you may get a phone call asking you to rate your satisfaction and give any comments.

If you get a survey call, please do take part. It only takes a few minutes and provides us with valuable information to constantly monitor our services and deal with any issues.

To keep your home in tip top condition, please remember to report any repair we are responsible for fixing as soon as it needs doing. Don't wait for it to get worse or until you have other repairs.

