

# UNDER ONE ROOF



## SHAPING UP

**Our first big Tenants' Conference brought people together to celebrate the contributions tenant voices make to Nehemiah's progress and future success.**

Held at the Holiday Inn in Great Barr, the 'Shaping Our Future Together' conference was open to all Nehemiah tenants.

The packed programme included presentations from Nehemiah's chief executive, Llewellyn Graham, and other staff on topics such as how tenant feedback is shaping the way Nehemiah operates.

Compellingly, two involved tenants spoke about their experience of participation and called for more tenants to get involved. Read more on page 4.

Discussions focused on Nehemiah's new corporate strategy – our roadmap for the next five years – after its initial consultation with tenants last Autumn. There were opportunities for tenants to ask questions and hold staff to account on Nehemiah's actions, ideas and plans. Partner organisations, like the National Energy Foundation, Age UK and Frontier Repairs, were on hand to chat.

Amongst the serious talk, there was laughter, food and raffle prizes! All the hallmarks of a fun and constructive Nehemiah get-together between tenants and staff.

Tenants attending the conference gave comments such as: "Informative way for tenants to have their say"... "Good interaction, improves understanding"... "Great to meet other tenants and learn about the impact of decisions in different situations".



## PLAN OF ACTION

**Feedback at the Tenants' Conference has been used to draw up an action plan.**

Site meetings with tenants speedily followed up on specific issues, for example, at Woodside Court about heating and redecoration.

The wider action plan is split into themes under the national Tenant Satisfaction Measures (TSM). For each there are tasks, who's responsible and the timescale. Some key areas are communication, maintenance, and neighbour relations.

The tenant-led Scrutiny Panel (see page 4) discussed the action plan at a special meeting in April. Progress and results from the plan will feature in the annual tenants' report and this newsletter.



# FLAG RAISING

On Commonwealth Day the raising of the Nations' Flag in Walsall was attended by our chief executive, Llewellyn Graham.

The event was hosted by the Mayor of Walsall, Councillor Anthony Harris. Other dignitaries included the Deputy Lieutenant for the West Midlands, Kevin Davis. Local school children took part in raising the flag and reciting the Commonwealth Affirmation. This is a pledge about upholding the values and fellowship of a unique global family. It includes the line: "every person possesses unique worth and dignity, and that by embracing our diversity, we grow stronger together." Commonwealth Day is observed on the second Monday of every March to celebrate the shared values that connect 2.5 billion people across 56 countries.



# SELF-SERVE

Tenants have helped us to put the finishing touches to the improved tenants' portal on our website.

They've helped further test and refine new features such as being able to request repairs and track progress, and set up and amend rent payments. The easy-to-use portal gives you greater flexibility and control. Look out for communication from us, and on our website, on how to get set up to use it.

# POCKET NOTES



**Nehemiah resident Aaron (not his real name) felt a huge sense of relief when he asked his housing officer for help with tackling his growing rent arrears.**

Faced with a notice seeking possession, he'd fallen behind due to the extra cost of the so-called 'bedroom tax' from having a spare room. Despite working part-time and having an agreement plan to gradually pay off his rent arrears, Aaron was struggling with the added weight of two other debts. At Birmingham Settlement, money advisor Jenny helped Aaron find a path through the problem. A benefit check showed he was already getting his full entitlements: Housing Benefit, income-based Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) and Personal Independence Allowance (PIP). When Aaron received a benefit notice telling him he needed to move onto Universal Credit, Jenny helped him to successfully apply. Aaron was also supported to make an application to his council for a Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP) to help with his rent shortfall. While he waited to hear, he kept up with this rent arrears payments. The welcome news soon came that he'd been awarded £785 to clear his arrears. Spurred on to make changes, Aaron was helped to better understand his income and spending and to hone his budgeting skills. He then put repayment plans in place to reduce his non-priority debts. Happily, Aaron is back on track with his finances and no longer has the worry of losing his home.



# STRIKE A POSE

We're a housing provider rooted in the drive for equality and empowerment. So on International Women's Day we wanted to support the call to speed up action for women's equality. Across the world, significant barriers to gender equality remain. Yet with the right action, positive progress can be made for women and girls everywhere. For all who care about human rights, we can call out stereotypes, challenge discrimination, celebrate women's success, and much more. Staff struck the #AccelerateAction pose to show support. Pictured left to right are: Naomi Lear, supported scheme officer; Marcia Cunnison, community partnership and engagement officer; Michelle Dickson; housing officer; Chanelle Matthews, housing assistant; and Rita Samuels, deputy housing services manager.



# CALLS RECORDED

**"Please note that calls are recorded for quality and training purposes". It's a familiar phrase to many of us when telephoning doctors, banks and other organisations.** It is now a message you will hear when you call Nehemiah. We're using the telephone call recording feature on our phone system as standard for all calls. Monitoring calls will help us deliver consistent high standards in customer service and spot relevant training needs to improve. Other benefits include being able to check that accurate information was given and investigate certain complaints. Call recordings are handled and stored in line with data protection laws to be fair, legal and transparent. Under the law, it is done on the basis of the 'legitimate interest' necessary for the business and to benefit customers.

Recordings are stored for 12 months. When personal sensitive information is discussed, you will be asked to give your consent for the call to continue. Personal information is only shared with those who need it. When taking payments over the phone, call recordings are stopped so no card details can be recorded. The plan to introduce call recording was discussed at an online tenant consultation meeting last year. Eleven tenants on our Scrutiny Panel then met to help us shape the policy. See our website or ask us if you would like a copy.



# WELCOME MICHELLE



**Our new housing officer for the Birmingham area is already building a great rapport with the tenants she's met.** Michelle Dickson joins us with over a decade of housing experience gained working at another Midlands housing association. In particular, she specialised in property lettings and supporting tenants with rent arrears. Through her time working at Birmingham and Solihull Women's Aid, Michelle gained skills and knowledge of safeguarding women and children affected by domestic abuse. Away from work, Michelle likes to relax by spending time with family and friends. Welcome aboard Michelle!



# TENANT VOICES

Meet Sheron and Leonie, two members of our newly-strengthened Tenant Scrutiny Panel.

Panel members are trained tenant volunteers who work together to review, monitor and influence how we perform as a landlord.

At the recent Tenants' Conference, Sheron (left) and Leonie (right) kindly agreed to jump into the hot seat to answer your questions. Here's what they said.



## Why did you get involved?

**Leonie** – I'd had a positive experience of Nehemiah as my landlord, so it felt easy to get involved. I'd heard about the participation opportunities in place. It's good to be involved in the decision-making rather than the landlord being an 'external force', as it were. It's important to me to know that my views, and those of other tenants, matter.

**Sheron** – When I moved into my home, I got involved in helping my neighbours. I like working with people to do the right thing. The Scrutiny Panel is a good forum to make a difference to people's lives, not just for myself but others too. The training has included liaising with scrutiny panels at other housing associations. It's great to know we can call on them to share ideas and learning.

## What project stands out for you?

**Leonie** – Although we're fairly new in our roles, there's been a few already. I'd pick the tenants' handbook for the schemes; making it more appealing and useful as we thought it was outdated. The tenant perspective offers a reality check – is it fit for purpose? Our comments were taken on board.

**Sheron** – Our role is to be the tenant voice to challenge things, in a collaborative and respectful way. Making a difference is what interests me – for example, in improving policies. I especially liked having input into the rent and service charges communication with tenants. We're soon to meet with housing auditors, who routinely examine Nehemiah, to discuss our views on the tenant engagement strategy.

## What challenges have you faced?

**Leonie and Sheron** – We've talked about this, but we really haven't faced any difficulties so far. Just hearing from other tenants about the issues is so useful. Together we can make the best improvements. We need to hear your voices!

## What are your hopes for tenant involvement at Nehemiah?

**Sheron** – As tenants, we have direct experience of the housing service. We don't work for Nehemiah and never have. We're independent and keen to make an impact, such as helping to streamline processes and explain them more clearly – like the recent leaflet we've worked on for lettings.

This time next year we hope to have more tenants involved, whether as scrutiny panel members or simply by sharing their ideas or concerns. We expect the issues we're talking about now to have progressed. A new sense of purpose!

**Leonie** – It's a chance to get involved, to speak up and shape Nehemiah's future – do join us! We'll be using this newsletter and other methods to update you on what's happening and how you can reach us.

**Scrutiny Panel members receive support and training, and have their expenses covered. Interested in finding out more? Get in touch with Marcia Cunnison. Her details are on page 8.**

# RUBBISH TIPS

We understand how frustrating the impact of the industrial action is for waste collections if you live in Birmingham.

Recycling (blue bin) collections remain suspended. Household waste collections are generally back to your usual collection day, so please put your grey bin out.

With so much accumulated rubbish about, the message from the council's Healthy Brum team is to take these precautions:

- Regularly wash hands with soap and water.
- Use bin lids as stored waste can attract flies.
- 'Double bag' waste, especially products such as nappies.
- Use gloves if you pick up rubbish that has spilled onto your driveway or street.
- If you or your child cut yourselves on waste in the street, wash and treat the cut to avoid infection.
- Never try to burn rubbish – you're risking lives and property.
- Stick to trusted sources, including the council's website – misinformation increases anxiety.



# GOOD RIDDANCE



**Dumping your unwanted goods and rubbish in public spaces or on other people's land blights communities and harms the environment. It's never acceptable, even when there is a bin strike. It's also a crime.**

Fly-tipping is a persistent problem nationwide, costing councils and housing associations millions of pounds a year to clear up. That's money which could be far better spent on other services.

But how can you be sure that fly-tipped rubbish isn't yours?

Some waste collectors fly-tip instead of paying for lawful disposal. They might advertise waste clearance on social media or be scrap metal collectors taking other waste for a cash fee.

Often, their customers are horrified to find out they've been tricked and that their rubbish has been fly-tipped after they have paid for waste removal in good faith.

A reputable waste carrier will not mind waiting while you check. If the waste is later found fly-tipped and traced back, action can still be taken against you.

- Don't just go with the cheapest option – there may well be good reason it's cheap!
- Keep a receipt and note vehicle details.
- Use a licensed waste carrier. Ask to see their licence or check 'waste carriers' online at [data.gov.uk](https://data.gov.uk)
- Ask where your rubbish is going.

# COMPLAINTS CHAMP

**When something goes wrong with our service, we see it as a chance to put it right and to learn.**

To champion a positive culture for complaints, we have a board member responsible for complaints (MRC). This is Juliana Crowe, who is chair of our Operations Committee.

Nehemiah's governing board examines quarterly reports from staff on complaints and uses the information to improve its decision making.

"My role is to make sure we delve deeper," explains Juliana. "We want to make sure tenants' views and experiences are heard through the complaints process and that learnings are used to make service improvements." Read more on complaints, and how we've acted on them, on our website or ask us for more details. [nehemiah.co.uk/your-home/our-complaints-process](https://nehemiah.co.uk/your-home/our-complaints-process)



# ON SAFETY'S SIDE



**Lusefa Salamon has returned from maternity leave to her role as Nehemiah's tenancy support officer.**

After a happy year at home, Lusefa is keen to spread an important safeguarding message from Nehemiah: if your domestic bliss has been shattered by domestic abuse you shouldn't feel alone. Support is available, from us and others we work with.

"Domestic abuse can happen to anyone and it's not just physical violence; it can be emotional, financial or controlling behaviour from your partner or another family member," explains Lusefa. "Whether it's hitting or isolating you from friends, threats or limiting your access to money, it's unacceptable behaviour that can leave you feeling trapped, scared or unsure where to turn."

"We offer a safe space for you to talk and find the right help. We act on what you want. For example, at first you may just want a listening ear. Another time you may feel ready to report the abuse or to get other support. We don't judge and we won't rush you."

We have a duty of care to safeguard you and all our tenants. So if threats to life are made, we will always do the right thing and report this to the local authority or police.

Reaching out can feel overwhelming, but you don't have to suffer in silence or go through this alone.



# DAMP AWAY

We treat damp or mould in your home as unwelcome guests to be removed, fast. This means if you report damp to us – or we find it on a visit – prompt action will be taken to get rid of it. We aim to respond within 24 hours and to cure the problem within 5 days.

1. Report damp or mould to us quickly by calling the usual repair line: **0800 849 1400** or from a mobile **03030 30 1000**.
2. Take a note of the reference number.
3. Get a call back from the contractor with a date for our visit.

We will remove the mould from walls and ceilings with a special wash. We will then look to identify what's causing the damp. Sometimes repairs are needed, such as fixing leaky pipes. Once we know why it's happening, we will put a plan in place with you to stop it returning. In the past year we've helped 154 households to deal with damp and mould, through advice, removal and, in some cases, repairs and new fittings such as extra-powered fans. We don't leave it there though; we do follow-up visits to check it's worked.



Modern living creates moisture, which can get trapped in our homes as condensation on cold surfaces like walls and windows. Too much of it causes damp and mould. We all bathe, cook and dry washing at home. But small things can help, like wiping down condensation and wringing out the wet cloth in the sink, and opening the window so moist air goes out and fresh air gets in. Warm, uncluttered homes, where the air can circulate, are less likely to have mould. So try to keep your home reasonably warm and avoid heating it less.

# SHINY HAPPY PEOPLE

**Housekeeper Marlene has a gift for making everything sparkle.** As well as taking great pride in her cleaning job, Marlene (right) uses own time and skills to decorate rooms and spruce up outdoor spaces. "I just love to see the smile on people's faces," she says.

Marlene works for a cleaning contractor employed at our two retirement living schemes in Wolverhampton, McCalla House and Shanti Niketan.

After making the schemes spick and span, she likes to sprinkle some extra magic. Along with the biscuits, she adds fruit to the table she has attractively set for the weekly coffee mornings.

Special get-togethers to mark events, like Easter or VE Day, see the communal lounge themed with ribbons, balloons and other decorations. Outside, Marlene has turned her hand to tidying and brightening the garden for residents to enjoy.



"When I spot something I can do, I keep going until it looks right. Nothing defeats me!" beams Marlene. "I've got a special cupboard at home where I store my reusable decorations. And my grandson is always ready to lend a hand with the music while I do the decorating."

Her zest and skills are much appreciated. "Marlene is highly motivated and goes above and beyond to help our tenants," says Marie Craig, the schemes' supported housing officer. "They always talk about what she does and the uplift it brings."



# THE APPRENTICE

**Feeling shy is normal when you start a new job – especially when you're 16 and fresh from school.** Now 18, Antone remembers feeling that way when he began his property maintenance level 2 apprenticeship with Nehemiah's repairs contractor, Frontier.

"I wasn't very talkative at first," he recalls. "I guess I felt a bit lonely, as I wasn't with others my own age at college or in work. I didn't really know what to talk about. But I eased myself into establishing a relationship with people. It's a skill that's important when you're going into tenants' homes." He's quickly picked up other skills too, as his apprenticeship involves spending a day a week at Walsall College and the other four days with the Frontier team on tenants' repair jobs.

The practical learning is giving him a taster of different trades such as carpentry, plumbing, and plastering which he plans to eventually specialise in. "He's made good progress," says Stephanie from Frontier, who has offered Antone the chance to move onto the next level apprenticeship.

So what prompted Antone to choose a property maintenance apprenticeship in the first place? "I didn't know what I wanted to do when I left school until my brother suggested the building sector," says Antone. "I found my apprenticeship on the government website and applied. At the interview I felt so nervous. But Nick and Stephanie from Frontier were really nice, and I could tell they just wanted to help me get on." Antone thinks apprenticeships are a great way to learn. "Whether at college or in work, everyone wants to help you. It's really fun too being part of a team."



Frontier delivers Nehemiah's repairs service in the Birmingham area. "It's rewarding when you get tenants saying they are really happy with our work," says Antone. "Sometimes we come across situations where the customer is stressed, perhaps about not being able to have what they want – or something else is bothering them. I try to understand and don't take offence. It's always helpful if people are patient with you. We are only here to help."

# ABUSE IS NOT OKAY

**Our housing staff are trained to be aware of domestic abuse. We understand that as well as affecting your wellbeing, it can have an impact on the number and type of repairs at your home or your ability to pay your rent on time.**

While we don't provide specialist support ourselves, we work closely with expert agencies who do. We are currently supporting several tenants to reach a brighter place. We can:

- Listen in confidence and offer reassurance
- Put you in touch with specialist support services
- Help you with housing options if you feel unsafe
- Advise on your tenant rights

## Ways to get help

Speak to your housing officer or our tenancy services officer. You can also talk to our safeguarding lead, Pamela Farquharson, by calling our main office on **0121 358 0966**.



## Call specialist helplines:

National Domestic Abuse Helpline – **0808 2000 247** (available 24/7)  
Women's Aid Live Chat – [www.womensaid.org.uk](http://www.womensaid.org.uk)  
Men's Advice Line – **0808 801 0327**

Call **999** if you're in immediate danger. If you can't speak, press **55** when prompted so the police know you need help.



# LET'S TALK MONEY

**Not a lot of good has come out of the cost-of-living crisis. But one positive is the willingness for people to talk about money.**

"Fortunately, there is less stigma and shame around talking about debt and money issues," says Rita Samuels, Nehemiah's deputy housing services manager. "The high cost of living affects people in all sorts of circumstances. What's always best is to use the help available."

If you're struggling with money, your first port of call is your housing officer. It doesn't have to be about rent arrears. They can help with all kinds of money worries affecting your life.

If more in-depth financial support is helpful, or you'd like a more tailored approach, your housing officer can refer you to specialist advisors at Birmingham Settlement.



**We spoke to Jelena Dukic, money advice service manager at Birmingham Settlement, to find out more.**

## **What does Birmingham Settlement offer?**

We can help you maximise your income and tackle any debt issues. All our advice is free and impartial. We work across the West Midlands – you don't have to just live in Birmingham to receive our support.

## **Who do you help?**

Anyone. In the past few months we've helped 55 Nehemiah tenants get on top of their money problems. It's included a range of issues including support with rent and energy bill arrears, dealing with personal debts, applying for benefits, and enabling new tenants to furnish their home.

## **How can you help with benefits?**

We can complete a benefit check with you to pinpoint whether you're missing out on any welfare benefits. It's a way to boost your income by making sure you are receiving your full entitlement. For example, we can help with applying for Universal Credit or benefits for health and care needs.

## **What about budgeting?**

Budgeting is a great way to understand and manage your income. It can reveal ways to cut back on non-essential spending. For buying essential items, there could be grants available to you, plus social tariff schemes which give discounts on bills such as water. The Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP) offered by councils can be used towards your rent. Council Tax can be high on people's minds. We can advise on available discounts if you're on a low income or living alone.

## **Can you help with debt?**

We offer advice on what we call 'priority' and 'non-priority' debts. Priority debts – such as rent arrears and energy debt – have the greatest consequences for non-payment. Non-priority debts still have consequences but less severe ones. These debts can include credit cards, personal loans, and bank overdrafts.

We can explain how debts escalate and what powers your creditors (those you owe to) have, such as enforcing certain debts in the county court. We can even advise on how to keep enforcement agents (bailiffs) off your back.

## **What debt solutions are there?**

Solutions may include actions like setting up payment plans based on your income and expenditure, or getting your debt's interest or enforcement put on hold. We can also help with exploring the possibility of writing off debts or applying for Debt Relief Orders and bankruptcy. We identify what option is best for you, as all our advice is based on your specific circumstances.

## **Why ask for help?**

Our aim is to get you back – and staying – on track with your finances. We act in your best interests. For example, details of what you discuss are only shared with Nehemiah and others when it is helpful to you, and only then with your permission.

Having money worries or being in debt is stressful. Yet there's no need to struggle alone or let the problem get worse. Just ask your housing officer to refer you to Birmingham Settlement for support – or call us direct on **0121 250 3000** and let us know you are a Nehemiah tenant.



## **Putting it out there**

This newsletter uses your survey comments and other feedback to cover the issues you are interested in. Something missing? Please let our community partnership and engagement officer Marcia Cunnison know if you have a story, content idea or would like more details on any topic featured.

**Call: 0121 358 8031 or 07739 705048**

**Email: [haveyoursay@nehemiah.co.uk](mailto:haveyoursay@nehemiah.co.uk)**

**Write: Nehemiah Housing Association, 1-3 Beacon Court, Birmingham Road, Great Barr, Birmingham, B43 6NN**

**Web: [www.nehemiah.co.uk](http://www.nehemiah.co.uk)**

**Facebook: [www.facebook.com/NehemiahHousingAssociation](https://www.facebook.com/NehemiahHousingAssociation)**