

Council Housing Annual Report 2022-23

Welcome to our annual report.

This review of our operations over the past 12 months (1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023) comes at a challenging time for our tenants and ourselves.

Rising energy bills, inflation pressures, and the cost and supply issues associated with sourcing building materials mean that just like our tenants, we face real financial pressures.

However, that will not stop us striving to provide the best possible service to each and every one of our residents – it's what we are here for.

We are also doing all we can to ensure our tenants have all the help and advice they need to navigate these difficult waters, either directly through personal contact or by signposting them to the help available and measures they can take themselves through our Your Home tenant newsletter.

Despite these challenges, this report highlights the excellent work being done on a daily basis by our team here at Gravesham.

We are proud to be one of the few local authorities to retain our own council houses, meaning we are in direct control of all repairs and maintenance and our tenants know they can speak directly to us if they have any issues or problems.

We are of course only too well aware that the number of people waiting for social housing in the Borough outstrips supply, which is why we are committed to a programme of building new council-owned homes and to ensuring our teams turn around vacant properties and make them available for their next families as quickly as possible.

I am proud of the way our team works with our tenants to deliver homes and a Borough they can be proud of.

With all good wishes

Cllr Jenny Wallace

Cabinet Member for Housing Services

Neighbourhood Services

The Council has recently changed the name of the service area responsible for managing our relationship with customers who hold a council housing tenancy. These services sit within the Housing Directorate under direction of Daniel Killian, Gravesham's Director of Housing, and collectively are now referred to as the Neighbourhood Services Teams.

With the creation of a new Neighbourhood Services section, encompassing teams responsible for Housing Income Collection; Neighbourhood Management including anti-social behaviour, Estate Management, Tenant Engagement and Right to Buy & Leaseholder Services, there has also been the appointment of a new Head of Neighbourhood Services, Andrew Johnson. Andrew joins Gravesham with over 20 years' experience in Social Housing and Neighbourhood Management and working closely with Daniel, is keen to drive change which re-focuses service delivery on the needs of Gravesham's council tenants, ensuring that everything the services deliver has our customers and their needs at the core.

Housing Income – collecting your rent.

Rental income and service charges pay for the services that all our tenants receive. This includes responsive repairs, planned refurbishment of new kitchens and bathrooms, redecoration of external areas and building new council homes. If rent is not paid, we cannot deliver these functions. Therefore, it is important that our tenants pay their rent, on time; and by doing so ensuring that the planned and required work can go ahead.

Despite Covid-19 restrictions lifting, the impact is still being felt by tenants who continue to be affected by the repercussions of this virus, such as an increase in unemployment alongside the cost-of-living crisis. To support our tenants, the Housing Income Team have changed the way in which they collect rent which is due and introduced a more collaborative approach by encouraging our tenants to contact the team as soon as possible to discuss any financial difficulties and to put a sensible and achievable plan in place to lessen any negative impacts. The team also offer help to tenants in submitting claims for Universal Credit as, for many of our tenants, it has been the first time they had ever had to make such a claim.

The team has significantly increased the amount of personal contact made with our tenants and this is something that we will continue, ensuring that we recover rent and arrears in a respectful and supportive manner. We have received very positive compliments from tenants thanking us for our empathy, understanding and support and telling us what a difference we made to their lives during these challenging times.

In 2022/2023 most tenants paid their rent in full and on time. However, there were a number of residents who chose not to pay their rent. The Housing Income Team make use of a range of informal contact methods, and when appropriate formal legal tools, to ensure that customers who could pay but chose not to are presented with a more robust collection approach; of course, that means that customers who couldn't pay due to their circumstances were able to receive more appropriate, tailored support.

The Council remains focussed on income collection and wants to send a very clear message that non-payment of rent through choice will not be accepted, as this is unfair to most of our tenants who try their best to make payments and work with the team during challenging times to agree an arrangement.

Rent is one of the priority payments that should be made before any other payments; this is known as a 'priority debt'. So, if wages/benefits are used for other things when the rent is not being paid, our Housing Income Team will use the range of Legal options available to ensure collection. It's important to note that persistent non-payment and/or refusal to cooperate with

our efforts to help you, could ultimately lead to the Council asking a Judge to grant possession of your home and this may ultimately lead to your eviction. This is not what the Council aims or wants to do, but if all other methods of rent collection have been exhausted, we may be left with no other option.

In 2022/23 we evicted 11 tenants for non-payment of rent. This low number is a reflection of our commitment to try our hardest to help our tenants to remain in their homes. For us eviction for rent arrears is a last resort and we will always do everything we can to avoid it being necessary.

Rent arrears position, 4-year comparison:

Year	Total Arrears at financial year end (£).	Figure as a percentage of the total amount of rent collected. (%)
20/21	£713,246.00	2.48
21/22	£876,761.00	2.99
22/23	£1,192,918	3.85
23/24 YTD	£1,241,003	3.75

As shown in the table above, rent arrears are increasing year on year when viewed solely as a numerical financial value; this is never a good position to be in but to some extent was to be expected following the introduction of a new universal credit system, the Covid-19 Pandemic and the financial crisis which ensued. However, when viewed as a percentage of the total expected income the figure year to date (YTD) is 3.75% and this represents a slight decrease on the end of year 2022/23 figure of 3.85%.

If you are having trouble in paying your rent when it is due, please let our Housing Income Team know as soon as possible. The sooner you ask for help, the more we can do to assist you! The team can be contacted by telephone on 01474 337000.

Our friendly staff want to work with you to solve the problems you are experiencing and are all trained to work in a non-judgemental way to help you sort out the difficulty you are experiencing.

Independent Living

The last 12 months have been incredibly challenging times for everyone, including the Independent Living Team. This team have responsibility for managing the relationship with our older tenants, living in our Independent Living schemes and as part of this are responsible for supporting their welfare, health, and safety. At the end of 2021, the team were completely restructured to better reflect the services they were providing; this included changing the name of the service from sheltered housing to independent living. Both the staff and our tenants have adapted to the new way of working and the team continue to provide support to some of our most vulnerable residents.

Throughout 2022/23, our Independent Living Officers carried out 37,123 welfare calls to our tenants.

Our Independent Living Schemes are designed for people over the age of 55 years old to live in a safe and welcoming environment with other people of a similar age.

Tenant Engagement

This is the second year of our current engagement strategy, which has been firmly embedded into our service delivery model. Engagement is at the heart of all our service delivery and all our staff are expected to take account of the needs of Gravesham's residents when planning and delivering work in our housing stock.

Our Tenant Engagement Officers have spent a significant amount of time over the last 12 months supporting residents whose resident associations had disbanded because of restrictions during the pandemic. With the support of our Engagement Officers many new residents' associations are up in running. If you would like any support to set up a formal residents' association or informal resident groups, please do contact the Tenant Engagement Team at tenantengagement@gravesham.gov.uk

In addition, the Tenant Engagement Team have been involved in a number of events such as the Riverside Community Fun Day, St Patricks Garden Consultation Events, coffee mornings, a range of community projects and groups and administering our covid support fund in addition to supporting a very successful Community Payback scheme.

The work of the Tenant Engagement Team is focused on addressing key issues for our tenants such as combatting loneliness, digital inclusion and shaping the future development of the estates you live in.

In 2023 there has been a change to the regulatory framework that social housing providers are measured and monitored by. One of the key changes has been the introduction of a set of Tenant Satisfaction Measures which landlords, including local authorities, are required to report on annually.

There is a requirement for landlords to ask the same set of questions nationally in a survey and then report the responses to the industry regulator; Gravesham is offering all of our tenants the ability to complete the survey and will publish the results at year end.

Any resident who would like to complete the survey can do so by contacting tenantengagement@gravesham.gov.uk visiting the Gravesham Website (www.gravesham.gov.uk) or scanning the QR code below:



Each household should only complete the survey once. Each month those who complete a survey are entered into a draw and have a chance to win £100 of high street shopping vouchers.

Housing Management - Estate Inspections

In 2021 we implemented a set of programmed estate inspections for the Housing Services Team. This meant that our Housing Officers have increased their presence on our housing estates by carrying out regular estate inspections alongside any of our tenants that want to be involved.

The number of homes on an estate will determine the frequency of inspections, these are currently:

Size of Estate	Frequency of Inspections
Less than 20 properties	Quarterly
Between 20 – 50 properties	Bi-monthly
Over 50 properties	Monthly

While many of these inspections have been carried out, often jointly with other departments within the Council to help address some of the more serious issues on our estates such as anti-social behaviour and fly Tipping, which have led to successful outcomes, we are aware that there are some estate inspections which have not been regularly completed. This has been caused by a shortage of staff in the housing directorate and is something that is currently being addressed,

During the last 12 months, our Housing and Independent Living Officers have carried out approximately 1,580 inspections to ensure we address issues promptly and effectively.

If you would like to join us for our estate inspections, we would love for you to join us and share your views on the estates in which you live. Details of upcoming inspections will shortly be added to the Gravesham website; you can also contact us by email or telephone to register an interest in attending and we will notify you of upcoming estate inspections.

Housing Management – Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB)

Unfortunately, there will always be that small minority that do not respect the area in which they live and choose to live in an anti-social manner. However, we have a zero-tolerance approach to - behaviour and are committed to reducing ASB through preventative work, providing support to victims and communities where ASB is more prevalent and using enforcement powers where necessary. Our primary approach will be to reduce ASB by educating people to recognise the impact of their behaviour and where possible, making changes to the physical environment to ‘design out’ the opportunity for ASB to occur in the first place. However, we will also take a robust stance on enforcement where preventative steps and interventions have failed to change behaviour. We will make full use of powers and tools available to us to tackle persistent problems and repeat offenders.

In the last 12 months, Neighbourhood Officers opened 101 ASB cases for investigation and successfully resolved/closed all of them.

If you are experiencing ASB, please do let us know by contacting your Housing Officer so that we can tackle the issues. You can contact your Housing Officer by email at tenancy.management@gravesham.gov.uk or by calling 01474 337000 and selecting the appropriate option from the menu.

If you feel threatened, intimidated or at immediate risk please do report any incidents of ASB directly to the Police either by calling 101 or 999.

Leasehold and Right to Buy (RTB) Services

We have seen a significant increase in the number of tenants wishing to purchase their council home over the last 36 months.

In financial year 2022-23, 109 RTB applications were received and responded to and out of these applications 39 were admitted for processing to purchasing their properties. 39

properties were sold in the financial year 2022-23, the net sales were £5,390,313.00. Gravesham can use these receipts to develop new council housing.

For our leaseholders, the law requires us to consult before we carry out any qualifying works or enter into a long-term agreement for the provision of services. In 2022/23, we carried out 111 Section 20 consultations. The reason for this is to protect leaseholders from paying unnecessarily large sums of money for work carried out to their homes. Qualifying works may include things such as window replacements, roof replacements and fire protection work. To ensure that we comply with legislation, we have carried out a significant amount of Section 20 consultations over the last 12 months, which reflects our commitment to ensure that our tenants and leaseholders have a safe and welcoming environment to call home.

Housing Development

Although we are required to sell properties to our tenants if they want to exercise their Right to Buy, we do try to mitigate the impact of this by committing to developing new council housing within the Borough.

In the last 12 months the Development team has completed the construction of 48 new homes for people over the age of 50 at Mariners Court, Valley Drive, Gravesend, giving our existing qualifying tenants an opportunity to move, whilst also addressing the needs of those on our Housing Register. This was 14 fewer new homes than the previous year, but much hard work has gone into securing planning permission for 8 much needed new rural homes in Instead Rise for people with a local connection and also planning permission for 46 new homes at St Columba's Close in Gravesend. These two projects will commence- <https://hdawards.org/scheme/constable-road-and-rembrandt-drive/>).

Furthermore, during 2022/23 the Council established the Gravesham Community Investment Partnership (GCIP) with partner private developer Hill Group. This is an exciting initiative that pools resources and promises to accelerate the development of new affordable housing on Council land within the Gravesham borough area to meet the Council's housing need to a much greater extent than previously achieved. The GCIP team is currently working hard on a pipeline of projects to help meet the Council's target of delivering 1,000 new homes over the next 5 years.

Our homes

As a landlord, we are responsible for carrying out a range of repairs in our tenants' homes to ensure they are kept in good condition. Our tenants also have obligations in terms of carrying out repairs such as fencing and replacement toilet seats.

Our dedicated and directly employed tradespeople continued to respond to tenants to make our homes safer and better and completed 24,307 repairs in 2022/2023 with a customer satisfaction with their last repair 99%. This was 2,000 more repairs than the previous financial year. We worked hard to make sure we could respond to repair requests and received 32,000 calls to the repair telephone line.

100% of emergency repairs were completed on time and 89% of non-emergency repairs were completed within the 28-day timescale.

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390 repair appointments made by tenants were missed due to tenants not being at home at the agreed time, and this came at a cost to the Council of £15,500. Money which could have been spent on providing other services to you, our tenants.

Tenants will be advised when rearranging a missed appointment that three missed appointments within a six month period will result in a recharge of £40 and will apply to all of the services that we offer such as Responsive Repairs, Planned Work and Servicing.

You can report a repair in the following way:

- By telephone on 01474 337777
- On the Councils website www.gravesham.gov.uk/repairs
- By email housing.repairs.team@gravesham.gov.uk

When someone moves out of one of our properties, we need to give our repairs team some time to make any necessary refurbishments, but we want to make it available as soon as possible to a new tenant.

During 2022/2023, we refurbished 294 homes to bring them up to a standard where they can be re-let and managed to complete a minor void that only needs basic repairs within 9 days and a major void that needs major work such as a new kitchen and bathroom within 23 days.

We continue to make sure we identify and minimise fire and building safety risks across all of our housing estates and blocks, to ensure you feel safe in your home and we remain compliant with emerging legislation and best practice. Fire risk assessments (FRAs) are carried out regularly and we completed 74 last year.

As your landlord we are committed to ensuring all our tenants live in a home that is warm, safe and in good condition. During 2022/23 we continued to undertake planned improvements to your homes which included replacing kitchens, bathrooms, boilers, installing new windows and doors, replacing roofs, external decorating, electrical testing of blocks and dwellings, LED upgrading of communal lighting and adaptations.

Throughout 2022/23:

- 86 homes had new window and door installations
- 2 blocks of flats had the flat roofs completely replaced
- 56 individual houses had their roofs replaced
- 57 blocks and 2 houses had cyclical decoration completed. This is where we undertake work to keep the external and internal communal areas of our properties in good decorative condition
- 15 blocks had communal flooring replaced.
- 1,127 dwellings had electrics upgraded and tested
- 48 blocks had communal electric upgraded and tested.

We also carried out several adaptations to help give our tenants greater freedom within their home including;

- 48 properties had level access showers/wet rooms installed;
- 11 properties had over-bath showers;
- 28 stair-lifts were installed in properties
- 2 kitchens were adapted

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- Essential safety maintenance of systems continued as usual, such as passenger lifts, communal lighting, CCTV, fire alarm, sprinkler and warden call systems, which included 216 new gas boilers Installed
- 2 Passenger Lifts Upgraded

Damp and Mould

The Housing Ombudsman produced a report at the end of 2021 setting out recommendations for landlords on how best to actively tackle damp and mould problems in their housing stock and support residents experiencing problems with damp and mould.

Gravesham's Repairs Team have carefully considered the recommendations in the report and have compared them against our existing services for dealing with damp and mould. While our service was already broadly being delivered in the way the Ombudsman recommends, we have identified some improvements we can make and have started to introduce these. These improvements will include:

- Taking a more proactive approach at identifying properties that could be at risk of damp and mould.
- Encouraging residents with health conditions or young children to make contact with us
- Introduce an 'every visit counts' approach to ensure that all Council staff and representatives take responsibility for reporting damp, mould, and condensation in our homes
- Large scale roll-out of smart monitoring technology in our homes so we can identify properties at risk of damp and mould, before it is reported to us.
- Review each damp and mould works order raised after 6 months to see if the proposed solution has been effective.
- Toolbox talks to be held frequently with maintenance staff in relation to damp, mould and condensation.
- A yearly programme of stock condition surveys which will be carried out by the surveyors within the service, providing greater confidence in identifying damp and mould and ensure that the required remedial works are processed.
- Introduction of the 'Healthy Homes Taskforce' made up of a number of Officers from different teams in the Housing directorate including Repairs, Energy & Sustainability and Housing Tenancy Management to discuss common issues and trends being found by the frontline Officers and ideas on how more proactive approaches can be taken to resolve damp and mould issues.
- Ensuring all Maintenance teams to follow the damp and mould policy to prevent damp and mould by tackling issues when involved with works on the property.

Energy & Sustainability

The sustainability agenda continues to be a priority area of focus for us, particularly giving the challenging energy costs all have experienced. The council are also committed to reducing carbon emissions and improving the energy performance of its homes. The decarbonisation and retrofit of these homes is essential for the council to reach its net zero targets.

During 2022/23, a number of key projects commenced which included:

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- Progress the design and feasibility in relation to the decarbonisation of independent living scheme, Springvale Court, Northfleet consisting of the installation of ground source heat pumps, solar PV panels and installation of LED motion sensor lighting to communal areas.
- Completed whole house retrofits to 2 properties consisting of improved insulation, air source heat pumps and solar PV panels bringing both properties to net zero and EPC rating A.
- Installation of 4 electric vehicle chargers on 2 of our estates.
- Completed communal LED lighting upgrades at 8 blocks of flats equating to 413 new light fittings.
- Finalised the Government's Local Authority Delivery Scheme Phase 2 (LAD2) funding scheme project which saw 92 properties receive a number of improvements including ground and air source heat pumps, solar PV panels and loft and cavity wall insulation.
- Installation of solar PV panels and batteries to 2 of the Council's high-rise buildings, Carl Ekman House and Chantry Court to power the communal electricity.
- Completion of the installation of ground source heat pumps to 16 independent living flats at Merston Court, Higham.

Caretaking and Grounds Maintenance

We know a clean and tidy estate means a lot to our residents and because of this it is important to have clear standards as to what they can expect. We are committed to making sure residents have estates that are clean and cared for, safe and secure and in a good state of repair.

We are working to deliver the climate emergency action plan and find more sustainable ways of working. This includes planting wildflower meadows and providing green spaces for residents. Residents told us they wanted natural green areas with more colour, and for us to think about nature conservation and value for money in our environments work. We have also been working to increase habitats for pollinators such as butterflies and bees, in line with Royal Horticultural Society guidance.

We also worked hard to deliver more play equipment at Fountain Walk plus a new Multi Use Games Area and outdoor gym at Carl Ekman House.

In November 2023 the management of the services which deliver our caretaking and estate management services will move into the newly formed Neighbourhood Services area of the Housing Directorate. In preparation for this we have appointed a new Estate Services Manager; the transition will see a much closer working relationship between the staff who deliver our estate management services and their colleagues in our Neighbourhood Management Team.

Complaints and Compliments

We really value the feedback we receive from our tenants. It's great to know what you think we do well, but also when we get things wrong so we can look at how we can improve our services based on your experience. We know there will always be things that don't go to plan, and we welcome complaints as a learning opportunity. Throughout 2022/23 we received 127 official complaints about a housing service. Whilst we are sorry that we haven't always got things right first time; every complaint allows us to listen to our tenants, explain

why we have made a particular decision and put things right but also understand how we can do things better next time. Thank you to those who contacted us to tell us that they were unhappy with the service they had received, as it has helped us to continuously improve the service.

Of these 127 complaints 120 were resolved at stage one of our complaints process, 7 at stage two. There were also a number of lessons learnt and service improvements made from the complaints we received. Some examples of these are; ensuring we have a process in place for keeping tenants updated, entering into a service level agreement with the Environmental Enforcement Team, so that we are all clear on roles and responsibilities and ensuring all details regarding a Housing Officer and the area they cover are easily visible and accessible on our website.

Compliments highlight areas of good practice and acknowledge the hard work and commitment of our staff. During the same period, we received 231 compliments. Thank you to all of our tenants who took the time to make contact with us to formally compliment a staff member or service.

The Housing Ombudsman

The Housing Ombudsman service provides a free, independent and impartial service for tenants, who can contact them for advice at any time. Tenants can also escalate their complaint to the Housing Ombudsman once they've exhausted our complaints process. During the year, 4 complaints were referred to the Housing Ombudsman for investigation.

The Housing Ombudsman will determine if there has been any maladministration in the handling of the complaints. You can find out more about the Housing Ombudsman on its website www.housing-ombudsman.org.uk where you can also find published determinations.

As a member of the Housing Ombudsman, we must complete a self-assessment against their Complaint Handling Code. We publish this on our website, and you can find our latest self-assessment here:

Watch this space

Over the next 12 months, there are some key changes taking place within Housing Services. These are:

1. Review of the way we deliver services to our tenants, focussing more on the services our customers tell us are important to them such as ASB and the upkeep of our estates.
2. Re-vamp of the services we deliver in relation to the upkeep of our estates, in particular the provision of cleaning and maintenance services in our blocks of flats. In particular resident consultation about the provision of cleaning services and how they can be improved.
3. As part of listening to our customers, we will be inviting residents to take part in focus groups, so that we can hear firsthand the difficulties encountered when accessing our services or engaging with our teams.

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NB: Please note that all figures provided as approximate, so may slightly differ from the exact number