

InTouch

Issue 46 Spring 2021

What's happening with our rents? - page 3

Meet our new Director of Homes and Neighbourhoods - page 8

Making your home work for you - page 20

Plymouth
Community Homes



WELCOME

It's amazing to believe it's been over a year since we first went into lockdown. The past 12 months has brought enormous challenges for everyone as we have all adapted to new ways of living and working.

One of the biggest changes for people has been getting to grips with new technology as we move so much of our work online. You can read our feature on page 10 where I and my fellow Board member Valerie and Communities worker Deborah discuss how we have coped with this virtual world.

Our Communities team has done a fantastic job of ensuring it continues to deliver activities and training for you from the comfort and safety of your own homes.

Our PCH Connect programme has provided a wealth of events for residents – find out how you can get involved on page 16.

As we move into spring and the gradual easing of lockdown restrictions throughout the country, please ensure you know what services we're resuming in the coming weeks. You can read about this on page 4.

This issue features an interview with Chief Superintendent Matt Longman, the man in charge of policing Plymouth's streets. Matt talks about some of the challenges he and his team face – and how communities can play their part in making the city a safer place.

We have the latest images of work taking place at Phase 5 of North Prospect. Our images show the new over 55s flats really taking shape. There's also news of our latest developments in Crownhill and further afield in Cornwall and the South Hams.

We've been awarded the Customer Service Excellence quality mark for making a real difference to our customers. The three-year accreditation shows our commitment to making sure we care, respect, listen and do the right thing by our customers.



Please continue to stay safe.

Nick



What's happening with our rents this year?

By now, you will have received a letter from us explaining what your rents and service charges will be from 5 April.

Our tenants get excellent value for money for the rent they pay. The social rents we charge are on average lower than other housing associations in Plymouth and amongst the lowest in the country.

The majority of our social rents are at least 40% lower than it would be to rent the same property from a private landlord.

How we set our social rents

We set our social rents using a formula from the Government, which allows us to increase social rents by 1.5%. This is based on the Consumer Prices inflation index of 0.5% at September 2020, plus 1%.

Any service charges are in addition to the social rent. They are set to cover costs and not make a profit. Therefore they can go up or down each year depending on what we estimate the cost of providing the services will be. This includes any adjustment to reflect the actual cost of services from previous years compared to what we estimated those costs would be.

Rents this year

From April 2021 most tenants will see a 1.5% increase in rent.

This means rents will be about the same level as they were five years ago because between April 2016 and March 2020, most current tenants received a rent reduction of 1% per year.

This year's 1.5% increase will apply to social rents, affordable rents on new homes built within the past 10 years, some newly acquired homes, shared ownership rents and most garage and parking space rents.

Some of our tenants in older properties pay an 'affordable rent', which includes any service charges, and although set higher than our social rents, are still 20% to 25% lower than if rented privately.

These tenants will see a decrease of up to 5% in their total rent and service charges. This follows a similar 5% rent reduction applied last year, which aims to bring rents for these properties more in line with our social rents over time.

How will I know what type of rent I am paying?

The letter will explain your rent and service charges and what the changes mean.

RENTS INVESTED BACK INTO PLYMOUTH AND SURROUNDING AREAS

As we're a social landlord, we don't have to pass profits to shareholders. Money from rents is invested back into looking after our homes, estates and communities, and building new homes.

That's the difference we make as a landlord – we give back to help residents already living in our homes and future residents.



Bouncing back from lockdown

As the country slowly eases out of lockdown over the coming months, we're looking at how our services can return to normal for residents and customers.

We began this by reintroducing a full repairs service from the end of last month. Repairs that were cancelled during this lockdown are being prioritised followed by those repairs that have been reported during the lockdown period.

Tenants do not need to call us if they have already reported their repair; we will call them and write to them with an appointment.

New repairs reported from 29 March will be booked in to be completed after the backlog has been cleared. Emergency jobs will be attended to as normal, within 24 hours.

Over the coming weeks, we'll be including more details about how we're going to do this with our Bounce Back plan.

Keep reading our website and social media channels for the latest news and you can also subscribe for regular email updates at our website here:

www.plymouthcommunityhomes.co.uk/email-subscription/



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Repairs FREE

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THE BEACON

The Beacon Café has reopened for takeaway drinks and food.

The café, located in the Beacon Community Hub in North Prospect Road, is open Monday to Friday from 8.30am to 1.30pm.



Alterations in your home – what you need to know

We know lockdown has meant people are spending more time at home than ever before. For some, that has given you a chance to think about how to spruce them up.

We'd just like to remind tenants that if you're thinking of doing any work to your property, you need to get permission in writing before you carry out any renovations.

In particular, we've noticed a trend for people painting kitchen cupboards, doors and even radiators with chalk paint.

Barbara Bottomley, Senior Repairs and Operations Manager, said: "We've had quite a few homes handed back to us recently that have not been up to the standards we'd expect.

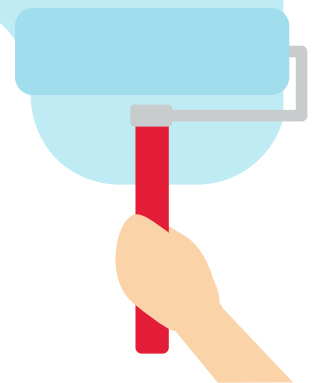
"This has meant we've had to carry out a lot of work to them before they're able to let out to new tenants.

"If you are considering any renovations to your home, please remember to ask us for permission first. We may have to spend money rectifying a problem and this cost could be passed on to the tenant, leaving them with a large bill to pay."

If you're a leaseholder, please check the terms of your lease regarding alterations.

You can read more information in our Alterations to Homes policy on the Publications page of our website.

For permission for any renovations, please write to: Repairs, Plymouth Community Homes, Plumer House, Tailyour Road, Plymouth, PL6 5DH.



Fire doors

If you're living in a flat, we know it can be tempting to remove the closers off your front doors but we'd ask that you don't.

Closers are placed on doors to ensure they close in a controlled way and are necessary to prevent the spread of fire. Removing them is a fire risk and stops the doors from working properly.

It's also unsafe to prop open doors with heavy objects for long periods.

Andy Lamerton, one of our Repairs Supervisors, said: "If we think that doors are being prevented from working as they should, we will have to send someone out to fix them.

"If residents are having genuine concerns about their doors, they should talk to their housing officers and it's something we can look into it further."

WILDLIFE DISPLAYED FOR ALL TO SEE



The artistic efforts of kids during lockdown will be put to good use this summer when their work is displayed at the entrance to a local nature reserve.

We set children in Efford a challenge while they were being homeschooled earlier this year – come up with a design which will be immortalised on a metal archway at Efford Marsh.

We've been working with the Friends of Efford Marsh, Plymouth City Council and CLAW on the Pocket Parks Project to make Efford Marsh a more inviting place for local people.

The group has got £10,000 to make improvements at the marsh. These will include putting in a seating area, planting a flower meadow and orchard and holding community events when social distancing is eased.

The winning designs will also be featured on an archway, which will be made and installed by QC Engineering later this year at the Top Meadow entrance off Military Road.

PCH Communities Worker Ryan Huws said: "The children were being home schooled and we thought it was something they could do alongside their schoolwork."

"We sent out letters to families in the area and asked them to draw wildlife images they would see at the marsh. We also sent out a drawing pack containing an art pad and felt tip pens. We got some really nice drawings back."

Elisabeth, pictured, nine, and her two siblings entered the competition and she was one of the winners. Her stepmum, Lisa, said: "During lockdown, we sometimes got stuck with things to do. When we got the letter about the competition, we thought it was a nice thing to do."

"The park is local to the kids and somewhere they go and visit. It will be nice to visit when the arches are up."

"Elisabeth loves to draw. She's so creative. This win is a positive affirmation for her."

There were three age categories and first, second and third prizes of £30-£10 in Love2Shop vouchers.



MEET OUR NEW DIRE

Carl Brazier joined us last month as our new Director for Homes and Neighbourhoods.

Carl is responsible for many of the PCH employees you will come across on a regular basis, including staff who undertake many of our repairs, housing officers, staff who support our customers in supported housing, staff who manage the collection of rental income and staff who support tenant and resident engagement.

Carl joins us from Stoke-on-Trent Council, where he was Director of Housing and Customer Service, responsible for a number of departments, including all aspects of housing, anti-social behaviour and community cohesion across the city, IT, the City Council Contact Centre, libraries and museums.

The married father of two says he was attracted to PCH because of our 'combined commercial mind and social heart' – as well as happy childhood memories of living in and visiting Devon.

He said: "I'd certainly describe myself as being passionate about housing. I'm involved in the national housing arena, hopefully considered to have a good track record which has led to national recognition and I do recognise the important role housing has in an area's, and the country's, fortunes.

"I didn't start my career in housing. I took my A Levels and then went off to do some travelling in the Middle East. I spent a bit of time studying and working in Israel, which was life-shaping, and I came back from those adventures a bit more worldly wise.

CTOR FOR HOMES AND NEIGHBOURHOODS

“When I returned home, my dad told me it was time to get a job and he lined up an interview for me at the local foundry where he worked. I was there for a time training to become a moulder but my dad told me he thought I could achieve more, so he encouraged me to go to university. I was the first in my family to go through higher education and I opted for a degree in Development which had aspects of Housing at Anglia Ruskin University.

“Close to graduating, I was made aware that where I was hoping to undertake my professional training would not be able to take me on due to the recession but my partner at the time suggested I apply for a vacancy she’d spotted at a local housing association and I got the job. This saw me join a very small housing provider, which was a standalone organisation developed by the council, with 50 homes in total. I learnt a lot during my time there – we were a two-person team initially.

“By the time I left around four years later, the business had grown to over 1,000 homes. It was a great experience where I learned all aspects of housing management, allocations, repairs, tenant engagement and development in a very hands-on way. I was really proud of the tenant satisfaction levels achieved and being one of the first housing associations to win a Charter Mark.

“From there I moved to London where I joined a council and I’ve moved between roles for councils and housing associations ever since, including roles on the Board of two housing associations.

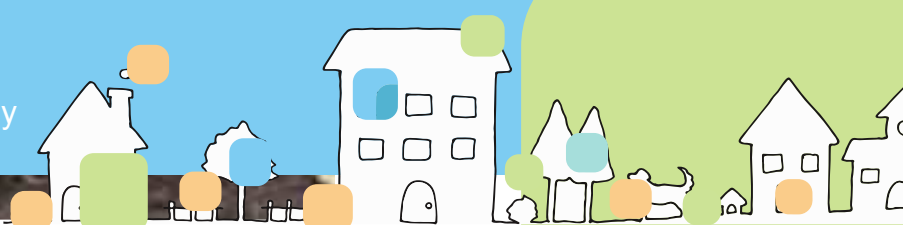
“I’m pretty open about my childhood and my

experiences of growing up. My mum was a diagnosed schizophrenic, something I didn’t really understand when I was young, but she spent time in and out of various hospitals. This put my dad under a huge amount of pressure – juggling work, caring responsibilities and raising a son, so at one point, I went to live with my nan and grandad in Brixham, Devon.

“When I moved back home permanently with my dad, we managed to get a council house and that’s where I lived until I left home. I’ve had first-hand experience of living in social housing and the South West. PCH combines both of those things.

“I’ve noticed that some housing associations seem to have lost their social purpose. They only consider building or investing if there is a solid commercial gain. It was clear to me that PCH is different – it’s combined a commercial mind with a social heart and remembered that the reason it’s here is to provide decent homes for people. That’s really important to me.

“I’m looking forward to meeting people, working at PCH, working with our partners and importantly you, our customers. I genuinely believe it’s an exciting time with so many changes in housing. One of these changes is around resident engagement for example, which I hope will be a positive change for you – our customers.”



Meeting up with friends and colleagues face to face has been almost impossible this past year which has forced us all to look at doing more things online.

Our Board members, who used to meet for meetings at our Plumer House headquarters, have had to grapple with technology from their homes instead of meeting up in person.

Communities Worker Deborah Beadle and Board members Nick Lewis and Valerie Lee share their insights into online working during the pandemic.

Deborah

My main role is to build relationships and try to be a 'useful outsider', but since the first lockdown it hasn't been possible to be out and about in the community.

In the past year, we have gone from actively calling people who may be vulnerable to delivering many online activities, most of which are on Facebook or Zoom.

There are social sessions, free training, job search support and 'hobby' clubs, such as photo club and history club. We still continue to support local groups any way we can; areas have different needs and wants and we try to tailor what we provide.

Going forward, how we engage with communities will never be the same again. We will have an online and physical presence, and a far greater emphasis on being outdoors as much as we can. Plymouth is blessed with lots of green space (as well as blue!) so the canvas is there for us to use as soon as it's safe to do so.

Nick and Valerie

We all learnt how not to run online meetings earlier this year when a parish council meeting in Cheshire went viral and gave Jackie Weaver her 15 minutes of fame.

Fortunately PCH Board meetings are nowhere near as aggressive as Handforth Parish Council, which is just how Chair Nick Lewis likes it.

Nick says he feels 'extremely positive' about virtual meetings and has never had to tell anyone to read their standing orders.

"People have behaved impeccably," he says, "Attendees are good at keeping their mics off when they're not speaking. It's easier to chair because people can raise their hand when they want to speak.

"It also saves travel time and carbon emissions. It's important to keep the variety though."

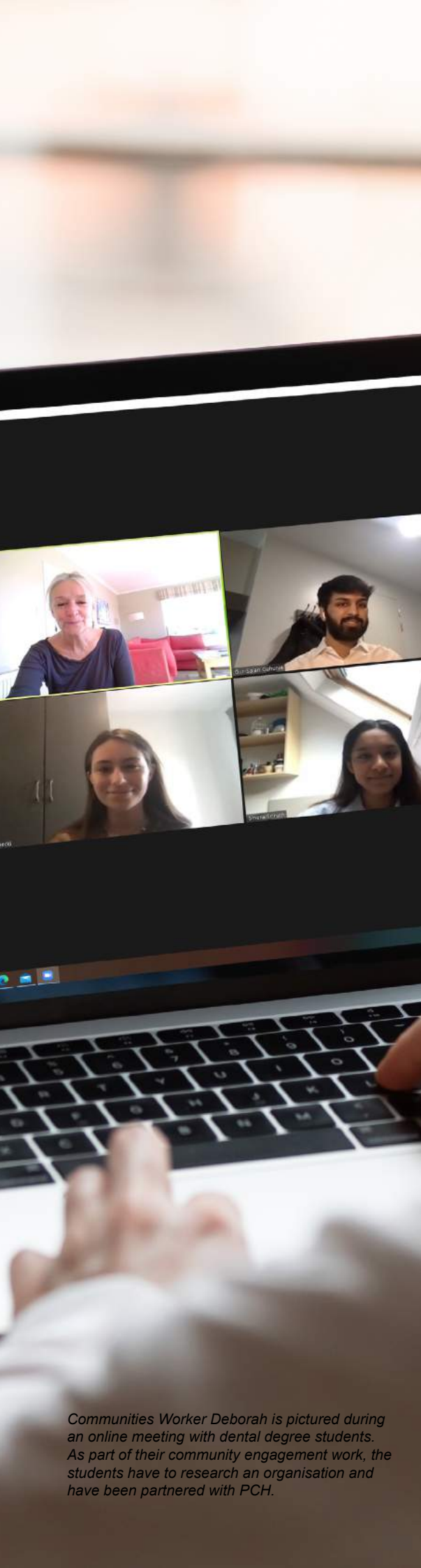
Fellow Board member Valerie Lee has a slightly different take on things. As a new Board member, she's not had the chance to meet colleagues in person so virtual meetings bring other challenges.

She said: "It's very hard to join a Board without the opportunity to meet in an informal and relaxed environment. A good understanding of the skills, beliefs and values of the individual members are key to building a high-performing team.

"I'm very grateful for the willingness of Board colleagues and PCH employees to take time to talk to me outside of the boardroom. Just getting time to know each other has been so helpful.

"Going forward it would be good to have a hybrid of meetings as virtual board meetings are very convenient but strategy sessions and occasional onsite meetings are essential for creative thought, spontaneous discussions and team building."





Communities Worker Deborah is pictured during an online meeting with dental degree students. As part of their community engagement work, the students have to research an organisation and have been partnered with PCH.

SOCIAL VALUE FUND

Residents moving in to our homes for the first time have been given a helping hand to buy new kitchen and bathroom utensils and equipment.

More than 20 households who moved into a property towards the end of last year were each given £25 Argos vouchers.

They were identified by our Welfare Reform team as residents who may have needed a financial boost to get them on their feet.

The team's Fiona Renfree said: "Most of the vouchers seemed to be for kitchen equipment or bathroom goods. One person had to move into a home with no white goods.

"Another had been living in a hostel for 12 months. They didn't have any kitchen equipment or utensils."

One tenant in Keyham who benefitted from a £25 voucher explained how grateful he was: "I had moved out of my mum's and didn't have anything. We put it towards a microwave. It was a massive help."

The vouchers were paid for out of our Social Value Fund, which comes from our contractors and suppliers.

Maria Schingen, PCH's Head of Strategic Procurement, explains how it works.

"We like to work with companies who share our ethics and priorities, so use their corporate social responsibility efforts to benefit our residents.

"For contracts worth more than £150,000 the contract goes out to tender and part of the process is that 5% of the marks go towards social value. If they offer us something they have a better chance of scoring higher marks.

"Our frontline teams – Housing Officers, Communities workers and Incomes staff – put forward applications for this pot of money and a panel decides how the money should be allocated.

"It's not just about cash. Social value can take many forms – contractors could provide gifts for resident Christmas parties, work experience opportunities, tools and materials for groups like the Men's Shed."

Some contractors who have provided social value recently include Womble Bond Dickinson, Lorne Stewart, Bell Group, Mitie, Ian Williams and BRC.

Better job prospects on the horizon

Residents will soon be able to benefit from a scheme which aims to improve job prospects.

We've teamed up with the Tamar Valley Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, which has just been awarded a £2.3million National Lottery Heritage Fund grant by the Tamara Partnership.

The funding will be used to provide a brighter future for the Valley and its communities, by making the landscape more robust and less susceptible to a range of pressures.

Part of this will include setting up apprenticeships and internships.

We're one of the scheme's key partners, meaning our residents will be able to benefit from opportunities.

Helen Ryan, PCH Head of Communities, said: "Plymouth Community Homes is delighted to be involved in the Tamara partnership and we especially welcome the opportunities for our residents to access apprenticeships, training and learning activities that this project will deliver.

"It's been a tough year for many so the prospect of offering new careers in the beautiful Tamar Valley is exciting and uplifting. We look forward to connecting more of our residents with the stunning natural and cultural environment around us through the projects that the NLHF funding brings; at a time when getting outdoors has more importance than ever before."



Do you need extra financial help?

Tenants who are receiving Housing Benefit or the housing costs element of Universal Credit are being reminded by Plymouth City Council that they may be eligible for extra financial help if they're struggling to cover their rent.

A Discretionary Housing Payment may be available if there's a shortfall between the amount of housing-related benefits people receive and the rent they pay, if they are in rent arrears or if they need to pay removal costs or rent in advance to be able to move to somewhere more suitable for their needs.

People may also be able to get a Discretionary Housing Payment if:

- they have a spare bedroom that Housing Benefit or Universal Credit does not pay for
- there is someone in their property who has a disability
- a benefit cap has reduced the Housing Benefit or Universal Credit they receive.

These are only examples and don't cover all the circumstances in which a Discretionary Housing Payment can be awarded.

To find out more information including how to apply visit:

<https://www.plymouth.gov.uk/benefitsandgrants/discretionaryhousingpayments> or ring **01752 668000**.



Together with Tenants is a project run by the National Housing Federation that will see all housing associations adopt the Together with Tenants Charter.

We've been involved in the project right from the start and we're now amongst the first housing associations moving to officially adopt the Charter.

Housing providers that adopt the charter commit to improving relationships and communication with residents. They also pledge to listen to the views of residents.

Residents will also be able to scrutinise our work, hold us to account and expect their homes to be of good quality and well managed.

If and when things do go wrong, residents will have simple ways of raising issues, making complaints and seeking redress.

You'll hear more about Together With Tenants in the coming months and we'll be sending out regular invitations to get involved. If you'd like more information contact the Communities Team on 0808 230 6500 or communities@plymouthcommunityhomes.co.uk.



THANKS PCH!

Ashley Fryer and his family are looking forward to a happier future after moving into one of our new-build homes earlier this year.

Ashley, his partner and three children moved into a home in the Quarters, in Manadon, after living in a property with another housing association for many years.

He said: "The state of the property was generally really good. There were a few issues but PCH addressed them professionally and in the timeframes they promised.

"We moved because my son and I are disabled and we wanted a flat plot for him with a garden. Our other property was on a hill. This has level access. The upkeep is brilliant and the area is fantastic.

"Moving during lockdown was easier than I thought. The key was in a safe box outside and we viewed the property by video."



DEVELOPMENT UPDATE



NORTH PROSPECT PHASE 5

These images show the progress being made at Phase 5 (Briarwood) in North Prospect.

Many of the homes are now out of the ground and headway is being made on the over 55s apartment block.

The lockdown hasn't slowed things down for Kier Living, which is building 143 homes – 77 for affordable housing and shared ownership and 66 for open market sale.

Phase 5 is due for completion by next Spring.



Rural homes on the way

Work is progressing on schemes which will see new homes coming to rural areas of Devon and Cornwall.

We've got six homes which will be available for the over 55s at the Parsonage Lea development in Newton Ferrers.

The homes – three for affordable rent and three for shared ownership sale – are part of a larger development of a total of 12 properties built by Pearce Fine Homes.

Our allocation will be available as part of a Section 106 agreement, which means they will be let to people on the housing register with a local connection to Newton Ferrers and surrounding areas.

We're expecting the homes to be ready by June.

Building work will also start in the next couple of months on nine homes at Pensilva, a village just north of Liskeard.

Andrew Borlase Builders are building a total of 18 homes, with nine of them available to us through a similar section 106 agreement which sees local people get priority.

We will have six properties for affordable rent and three for shared ownership sale with the remaining nine available for open market sale.

Work is due to start in the next couple of months and be finished by Spring 2022.

All our shared ownership homes will be available for sale through SO Living.

New partnership will see more homes on the way for Plymouth

We've joined forces with Halsall Homes to develop 38 new homes at the site known as Quarryfields in Crownhill.

The scheme, known as Silver Hill, will have 27 homes for sale through Bradleys estate agents.

First foundations at the site, off Tamerton Foliot Road, are due to be dug this Spring.

The first new homes are expected to be available for occupation by the end of the year and the scheme will complete next year.

Six homes will be available for shared ownership sale through SO Living and five for affordable rent from us.

The homes will be built and sold by PCH Regeneration Company, which is the development arm of PCH. Proceeds of sales from these homes will be used to invest in further homes and services for residents in Plymouth.

The development will see a large area of woodland adjacent to the site retained, enhanced and ultimately passed to the city council to manage, thereby securing its future for the enjoyment of local residents.

PCH CONNECT

Our new way of delivering community activities, resident involvement and resident learning!



ONLINE GROUPS

If you are on Facebook please join our PCH People Social Group for our latest opportunities. Visit www.facebook.com/groups/2660427387399028/

Some of the community groups we support can also be found online:

Efford Forum/Friends of Efford Marsh:

Updates to residents of Efford are posted on 'The Laira and Efford Notice Board' Facebook page Link can be found at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/359649111163393/>

North Prospect Community

Updates to residents of North Prospect regarding groups including North Prospect Tea & Toast are posted on Leigh Ferguson's Facebook page. Link can be found at <https://www.facebook.com/leigh.cdworker.9>

Photo Club - When: Tuesdays 1:30pm-2:30pm

Video conferencing social sessions to share photos and ideas. For more information on this drop-in session please email: communitiesteam@plymouthcommunityhomes.co.uk

History Club - When: Thursdays 1:30pm-2:30pm

Each week the group will pick an interesting subject to research and share. We will use video conferencing to share our ideas. For more information on this drop-in session please email: communitiesteam@plymouthcommunityhomes.co.uk



SOCIAL SESSIONS

Tuesdays 11am - 12pm - North Prospect Tea & Toast

You will need access to Facebook Messenger for this. To join us for a chat contact Leigh Ferguson <https://www.facebook.com/leigh.cdworker.9>

Tuesdays 12pm - 1pm - Janner Men's Shed

Janner Men's Shed meet on Facebook every Tuesday at 12 noon. Members only.

Tuesdays 12pm - 1pm - Craft Social Sessions

For anyone who loves all things crafty. To join the group contact Hayley Kemp <https://www.facebook.com/hayley.kemp.3910>

Wednesdays 11am - 12pm - Notte St Community Cafe Elevenes

Everyone welcome to join in and have a chat and you're welcome to join with audio only. To join the group contact Hazel Alexander <https://www.facebook.com/hazel.alexander.507>

Wednesdays 12:30pm - 1:30pm - PCH Lunch Bunch (incl Food & Craft)

All welcome to join in and have a chat and you're welcome to join with audio only.



Alongside our current PCH Connect programme, we'll be running some special virtual sessions/ events including cooking, crafts, storytelling, games and quizzes. You can find out more in our Facebook PCH Social Group (link above) or in our Facebook Event group www.facebook.com/groups/334095574329839



Tell us what you think

We would like to hear your views on our services. For more information: www.plymouthcommunityhomes.co.uk/our-community/get-involved/
Please note this is open to PCH residents only



Computer Skills

Monday - Friday, 9am - 5pm at a time to suit you. Want to learn new computer skills or learn how to use social media to keep in touch? Book some time with one of our staff to help you. To book an appointment email communitiesteam@plymouthcommunityhomes.co.uk



Job Search Support*

Monday - Friday, 9am - 5pm at a time to suit you. Book some time with us to help guide you through job searches, writing a CV and recommended online learning courses. To book an appointment email communitiesteam@plymouthcommunityhomes.co.uk



Something interesting?

Visit our 'Give it a go channel' We will be regularly adding new activities; things you may not have thought about trying before and we hope you'll really enjoy. You may find a new hobby and will definitely have fun. Search for 'Hazel Alexander Community Worker' on YouTube



FANCY LEARNING SOMETHING NEW?

WHEN: Everyday at a time to suit you Learn something new with online courses.

Visit [https:// www.plymouthcommunityhomes.co.uk/our-community/learn-for-free/](https://www.plymouthcommunityhomes.co.uk/our-community/learn-for-free/) to see our range of courses as well as learning offers from our partners. Current courses: Equality and Diversity Training, Food safety and cooking ideas. **NEW:**

Creative writing workshops. Group calls on Friday or work at your own pace using the guides available online.

Update your Digital Skills You can also use the free 'Learn My Way' hub to learn computer skills or basic computer skills like online banking or social media. Log in by going to the website <https://www.learnmyway.com/> and sign up using our centre code – 8000268. Please note this is open to PCH residents only.

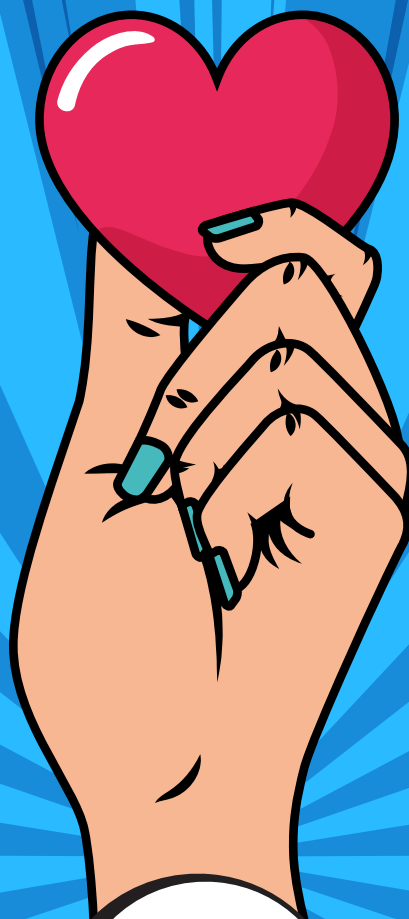


HOW TO TAKE PART:

Let us know if you'd like to take part by contacting communitiesteam@plymouthcommunityhomes.co.uk with the name of the activity you'd like to join along with your contact details (full name, mobile number, email address). You can also telephone our Communities Team on 0808 230 6500.



PLYMOUTH
CITY COUNCIL



Could you be a **COVID-19 COMMUNITY CHAMPION?**

Community Champions are local volunteers who help spread timely, easy-to-understand and reliable information about COVID-19 and the vaccination programme.

We are recruiting volunteers who live or work in the city and want to help make a difference in their community, by ensuring people are kept up-to-date.

You might be someone who lots of people know and trust; you might be involved in a community group or organisation; you might have lots of family who live in the city or you might be involved in a popular business.

If this is you - register now at

www.plymouth.gov.uk/covid19communityinformationchampions

We have recently updated and reviewed our Customer Complaints and Comments Policy and made sure that actions from the Complaint Handling Code were included.

Handling complaints fairly

The Housing Ombudsman has introduced a Complaint Handling Code that encourages us to understand the complaints we are receiving.

The code also aims to help us understand the impact on residents of how these complaints are handled and how we can learn from complaints to improve our services.

We're expected to respond to complaints effectively and fairly. The Code acts as a guide for residents setting out what they can and should expect when they complain to us.

The Code also provides residents with information about how to make a complaint and how to progress it through our internal complaints procedure.

It supports an approach to complaints that is clear, simple and accessible and ensures that complaints are resolved promptly, politely and fairly.

A paper copy can be provided on request or you can view it online here:

<https://www.housing-ombudsman.org.uk/landlords-info/complaint-handling-code/>



If you're looking to carry out a mutual exchange this could be the perfect app for you.

We have just invested in a piece of tech called SwapTracker, an app which is part of HomeSwapper.

Tenants used HomeSwapper when they want to swap homes with someone else in a housing association property.

If you download the app, once you find someone, you can use the app to track the progress of your application.

Senior Housing Officer Adam

Stockman explains its benefits. He said: "It saves tenants calling us to check up on progress and it saves on paperwork. The customer can just log on and see how it's progressing. They don't need to go through the Contact Centre and wait for callbacks.

"All communication is done through the app. It will be a massive improvement on customer experience and interaction and make the process of moving home much smoother."

You can download SwapTracker to your iPhone or Android phone.

Making your home work for you

PCH leaseholders could make the most of a scheme for landlords which matches homeless people waiting for properties with empty homes.

The scheme, which has become informally known as HouseLet, is run by Bournemouth Churches Housing Association (BCHA).

Plymouth leaseholder Chris Betts explains how it works.

“My flat has been a part of the scheme since 2012. I initially saw it featured in the local paper and phoned for details.

“There is an initial inspection of the property to check its suitability (not all properties are suitable), following which there may be some things for the owner to do in order for it to be accepted. Once this is done, there is a contract to sign and then off you go.

“I got involved primarily because, at that time, I was in full time employment as an engineer with duties that took me away from Plymouth for periods of time. This made looking after the flats I owned difficult, so one less to manage was welcome.

“This is indeed one of the benefits of the scheme for landlords, as BCHA takes on the complete management of the properties in the scheme, including maintenance and upkeep.

“Another benefit to owners is that there are no void periods to worry about, as the rent is payable regardless of whether the property is occupied or not.

“The scheme also promises to return the property to the landlord at the end of the lease period in good condition subject to fair wear and tear.

“Rent payable is fair, although I know some landlords would consider it to be slightly below the market level. I don't agree with that view myself, because putting a property into full management with an agency would cost approximately 15% of the achieved monthly rental.

“I believe the scheme is a very good one for landlords and I would have no hesitation in recommending it. It is a more cost effective way to temporarily house people, rather than using bed and breakfasts so benefits the tax payer also.”

BCHA is currently looking for another 40 homes in Plymouth so if you're a landlord who would like to find out more, email KirstyMatlock@BCHA.org.uk.

As part of the lease agreement, BCHA is responsible for rectifying repairs and pays for all safety certification such as gas checks.



On Thursday 6 May, residents in Plymouth will have their say on who represents them in the local elections.

In order to vote, you must be on the electoral register. The deadline to register to vote is midnight on Monday 19 April.

If already on the register, you may wish to register to vote by post. It's easy and takes just five minutes to apply online.

Go to www.plymouth.gov.uk/votingandelections/registervote today.

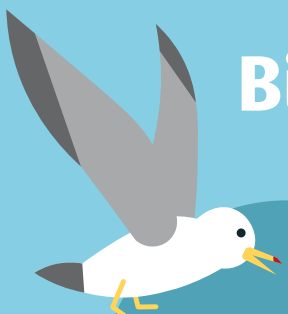
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Bird / squirrel feeding




Attracts seagulls and causes noise and aggressive behaviour



There's increased fouling of washing, cars, garden furniture



Food can also attract vermin ie rats even if it's not intended for them



We know many people like to see small birds in their garden. If you do want to feed, please put the food high up where it can't be accessed by big birds or pests. You can find out more here: plymouth.gov.uk/animalsandpests/birds

Following advice will keep the neighbourhood safe and hygienic for everyone





As part of a new series in In Touch, we're going to meet some of the key figures in Plymouth about their role in making the city a better place.

To kick things off, Communications Officer Joanne Coates interviews Chief Superintendent Matt Longman, Plymouth's police commander.

Anyone who has fallen victim to crime has surely been reassured to know the police are just a phone call away.

But some would say if the crime has already been committed, it's too late: prevention is better than cure.

That's a view that Chief Superintendent Matt Longman shares. Matt says working in and with the community is crucial for building trust.

Matt said: "It's not just about us turning up when it goes wrong. We need to work with the community and understand them. I want the city to be safer under my command. It might sound obvious but I need to be clear on that. I want people to feel confident we are looking after them. I don't think we are always good at reaching people."

Matt began his police career with Hampshire Constabulary and came to Devon and Cornwall in 2003.

He was based in Plymouth when he was relocated to South Devon to become Chief Superintendent. He returned to the city last October.

"It really did feel like coming home," he said, "Devon and Cornwall is such a diverse force area but I love being in the heart of a city."

Which is probably why he's so keen to ensure his officers are also at the heart of our communities. This is especially true when it comes to tackling issues like County Lines.

This is where illegal drugs are transported from one area to another, often involving children or vulnerable people who have been coerced into these networks.

Associated with this is the practice of 'cuckooing', whereby these offenders take over the homes of vulnerable people to carry out their drug dealing.

"It's become a big issue," admits Matt, "There is a big issue with vulnerable people – cuckooing and people ending up in debt. There is exploitation. There is a whole lifestyle surrounding it.

"Again there is a community connection. We want to get more neighbourhood teams and PCSOs into the community and the community can help us by reporting. Some people will be fearful because they might have a relative who is a victim. We're after the people causing the problem, not those being exploited. People should never be scared of reporting things to us.

"We want to make Plymouth an uncomfortable city for drug dealers to exist in."

Matt also discussed knife crime. He said: "When you compare us to other parts of the country, we don't have a significant problem. That's not to say it's something we don't take seriously. The level of knife use is quite low but when it does happen, it can be catastrophic. It's an area we are working carefully on.

"If your son or daughter is carrying a knife, you need to have a conversation with them. Another part of this is going in to schools and telling young people what can happen if it goes wrong."

I asked residents and frontline staff what questions they wanted me to put to Matt.

One resident, who had spent months living in the shadow of drug dealers in her block, wondered how the police felt when known drug dealers who had been arrested were released back into the community to continue plying their trade?

Matt admitted it can be frustrating but added: "We have a high level of tenacity – we will keep going. We would

ing to be talking to some work to make the city a

ochrane interviewed Chief
Commander.

urge people to ring Crimestoppers anonymously to report anything. We need people to paint a picture for us. We can monitor a situation to see if it becomes a problem.

“It takes time to build cases. We would ask that people try and be patient. If they’re in immediate danger they should report concerns straight away.”

Matt admits getting through to someone on 101 can be a ‘source of frustration’.

“Quite often there will be no queues,” he said, “Sometimes it will be five minutes. It puts people off. Resources are being put into it and people can also email 101.”

This neatly leads on to my next question – the age old complaint of there never being enough ‘bobbies on the beat’.

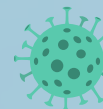
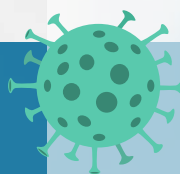
Matt said: “There are more trainees coming in to the force now. I will be looking at ways to get them among the public. Officers don’t want to spend time at their desks. They want to be out with the public.

“There has been a great influx of new faces, the most I’ve seen in my career. It’s great because it means I get people with fresh ideas. We’re getting people in who are more tech savvy.”

These days Matt spends more time in meetings than on the streets, but he does still get out when he can.

“I love it. I was recently knocking on doors in Stonehouse. There are neighbourhood officers working really hard there and in St Budeaux to name but a few places. It’s about trying to prevent problems rather than letting them escalate. The community can laser guide us to areas we need to be in.

“We (the police) are part of the jigsaw but we’re not the only ones. The community are our eyes and ears.”



I couldn’t let Matt go without asking him about Covid – how he thought his teams had responded to social distancing breaches over the past year.

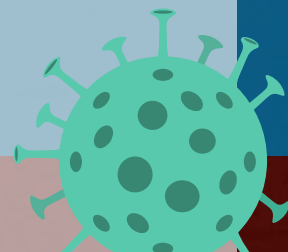
“We received additional resourcing to deal with it. On the whole, people have been really good in what’s been a difficult time. That includes young people and students – they have faced particular challenges. Staff have put themselves at considerable risk – some have been spat at.”

He’s also made sure his teams keep in touch with those at risk of domestic violence, a subject very much on his ‘horizon’.

“It’s a concern as we approach the ending of lockdown. There are people who feel they are unable to report. We have tried to keep in touch with vulnerable people.”

The head of the Police Federation in the South West recently said that he thought further resources would be needed in the region to cope with the influx of visitors over the busy summer months. Is Matt similarly fearful?

“It does get busy in the summer. Visitors go to Cornwall but local people stay in Plymouth, they go to the Barbican for example. People need to be sensible and think of the pressure they may be putting the ambulance service, the RNLI and us under. I have confidence people in Plymouth will be sensible.”





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