

# Homes & Gateway Services

## Cabinet Member Bulletin

### Deputy Leader, Alison Butler

#### December 2018

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## Latest News

### Resident Involvement

A review of resident involvement activities across housing is underway and has already led to improvements to the way that we engage with residents about their housing services and neighbourhoods. This has resulted in 8 new members as well as 12 previous members being reselected for the panel of the Tenant and Leaseholder Panel (TLP) representing a wider range of our residents across the borough. A new associate membership option is also now available enabling residents to participate virtually in the panel's activities without attending meetings. This provides an option for those individuals who are unable or do not wish to attend evening meetings to still be fully active in influencing the strategic decisions the council takes about how we manage our homes. In addition the council is establishing a new virtual safety panel to ensure that residents' views are heard loud and clear when it comes to the safety of their homes.

### Landlord Licensing

Two private companies who failed to license their privately rented properties under Croydon's selective licensing scheme have been fined a total of £32,000. The companies, AA Homes and Housing and Anabow Services Ltd, were initially issued financial penalty notices for £26,000 and £12,000 respectively after the London Fire Brigade notified the Council of serious fire safety issues in a block of flats on Sydenham Road, and subsequent investigations showed that 36 of the 52 flats did not have the required licences.

The financial penalties were issued taking into account the culpability of the owner and agent and the potential for harm to be caused as a result of the failure to license. In this case the companies were fully aware of the requirement to license (as they had several other properties already licensed) but they had not made applications for 36 of the flats.

Citing a "glaring omission" in AA Homes' failure to license that it should have known about, Judge Sonya O'Sullivan's written judgement said: "There were serious fire safety issues in the property and accordingly there was serious harm or potential harm to the tenants in their failure to license."

# Homes & Gateway Services

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---

At the hearing London Fire Brigade officers (LFB) told the judge-led panel that LFB had alerted Croydon Council after finding fire safety breaches at the five-storey private residential block. LFB watch manager Daniel Rosling said the seriousness of the conditions found at their visit in September 2017 had been a “10 out of 10”, citing a locked fire escape, poor ventilation and defective fire doors. He said that as a result of the LFB issuing an enforcement notice, all matters identified in the notice had since been resolved.

Both companies appealed against the amount of penalty and the final decision from the tribunal was that the penalty against AA Homes and Housing be reduced to £20,000 – the appeal by Anabow Services Ltd was dismissed and their penalty was not amended.

Private landlords have a duty to keep all their tenants safe, and the council’s landlord licensing scheme makes sure they do. This landlord knew they had to license all their rented properties but failed to meet this responsibility until council officers took action. Most Croydon landlords do the right thing, and this case shows that any landlord who does flout the rules risks a hefty fine.

#### **Appointment of New Directors**

I am pleased to announce that Julia Pitt has been appointed as our director of gateway services and Yvonne Murray has been appointed director of housing assessment and solutions.

It is great to see talented employees being promoted to these roles, supporting our commitment to an environment where talent can flourish. These are both key roles in the new Gateway, Strategy and Engagement department. Julia’s permanent appointment follows a nine-month secondment in the role, leading on our strategic priority of helping to promote the independence and resilience of our residents through Gateway Services. Julia has worked in Croydon since 2010 and is passionate about working with local communities. She has led a number of initiatives within the gateway and housing transformation programme.

Yvonne will be responsible for all matters relating to housing assessment and solutions. She brings with her a wealth of expertise and experience in housing and has been promoted into the director position following six years as head of tenancy and caretaking.

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### December 2018

---

#### **Croydon receives £61m from Mayor of London to build new council homes**

The Council has welcomed a major grant from the Mayor of London's new council homebuilding programme.

We have received £61 million from City Hall's £1 billion 'Building Council Homes for Londoners' programme, which is dedicated to building more than 11,000 new council homes.

The grant funding awarded to Croydon will provide 888 affordable housing units.

Croydon is already building council homes in the borough. Council-established developers Brick by Brick (BxB) currently have planning consent on around 40 sites, which will provide 1,036 new homes, of which 498 (48%), will be affordable. Croydon Affordable Homes will be letting homes on the sites.

Here in Croydon we're committed to putting our residents' housing needs first. We are already building homes to buy and let at affordable prices, and we've introduced lifetime tenancies for council renters. This money from the Mayor of London is most welcome as it allows us to continue to build homes at affordable prices for those in our borough who need them most.

#### **Croydon and Birmingham join forces over fire sprinkler funding call**

Birmingham City Council continued their call for Government to fund sprinklers in social housing nationwide after a visit to Croydon's near-complete programme.

Days after the Grenfell Tower tragedy in June last year, both Birmingham and Croydon announced they would retrofit sprinkler systems in their high-rise tower blocks.

Croydon was the first council to begin its fire sprinkler retrofitting programme in 26 of its tallest blocks last autumn. This is costing the council £10 million from its housing budget and delaying other necessary long-term repairs like bathroom or kitchen upgrades.

Croydon will have completed all 26 blocks before Christmas and showed one of these buildings with sprinklers and broader refurbishments to senior representatives from Birmingham, which will begin installing its own in the coming months.

# Homes & Gateway Services

## Cabinet Member Bulletin

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### December 2018

---

I was pleased to accompany both Councillor Sharon Thompson, Birmingham City Council's cabinet member for homes and neighbourhoods, and acting corporate director for place Robert James, around a 10-storey block at College Green, Upper Norwood.

The visit included meeting Brian Black, one of the College Green residents to get the new sprinklers who had witnessed last year's Grenfell Tower fire 10 miles away from his eighth-floor flat. The 69-year-old said: "I was delighted when I heard that Croydon Council was going to do this and I was surprised how quickly they were off the blocks, and a very good thing it is that they are doing. To retrofit them is costly but what value do you put on people's lives? They give such peace of mind."

Since the Grenfell tragedy, both we and Birmingham City Council have unsuccessfully requested a funding contribution from Government ministers. This is despite calls for sprinklers to be retrofitted in high-rise blocks, including from shadow housing minister and Croydon Central MP Sarah Jones, and Dany Cotton, the commissioner of London Fire Brigade. Sadly, although our fire sprinklers programme to make our taller tower block residents even safer is nearly finished, it will hit us hard financially because the Government has not lifted a finger to help. It's been difficult enough for Croydon to find £10 million to fit sprinklers and do other works in 26 blocks, but Birmingham needs to do over 200, so we urge Government to see sense and help councils like ours afford these essential upgrades.

#### **Council affordable homes drive passes 150 mark**

Our drive to buy and rent out affordable homes to Croydon families has topped the purchase of 150 properties.

In July 2017 we set up Croydon Affordable Homes (CAH) to provide at least 250 homes for Croydon residents that cost no more than 65% of the average market rent. Meaning homes can be let about £400 pm below costs.

So far, we have bought 167 mainly two- and three-bed flats and houses, plus a four-bed house and a five-bed house, all of which are for Croydon families previously in temporary accommodation.

Every new property we buy means another family will get a newly-refurbished, good-sized home with security not offered on the private rental market, and it also reduces the cost to the council of placing people in expensive temporary accommodation."

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# Homes & Gateway Services

## Cabinet Member Bulletin

### Deputy Leader, Alison Butler

#### December 2018

---

#### **Universal Credit: councils face deeper debt with this badly planned policy**

Croydon Council has been dealing with the government's much-maligned Universal Credit scheme since 2015. And as a council we continue to plead to the government to put Universal Credit right. Thanks to recent high-profile interventions from former Prime ministers Gordon Brown and Sir John Major, the national media is now fully focused on a fact we've known here in Croydon for years – Universal Credit is a mess.

Croydon was one of the first councils unlucky enough to be chosen by the government as a Universal Credit full roll-out area in 2015. This led to struggling families getting into more housing debt, facing eviction by their private landlords and not having enough money to get by. We built on Gateway, our early intervention welfare service, which has prevented homelessness by giving struggling residents one-on-one budgeting support and skills training from its own dedicated enablement and welfare advisors.

The numbers speak for themselves. In 2017/18 alone, we have helped more than 2,400 of Croydon's most severely affected families avoid homelessness, given 14,900 people budgeting support, improved the digital skills of 4,700 people and reduced the number of people presenting as homeless by 15%.

Since Universal Credit was introduced to our borough, we have come up with other innovative plans to help some of our most vulnerable families from slipping further into debt and rent arrears. We created our own social lettings agency, where the council acts as a managing agent to match tenants at risk of homelessness with landlords. Initially we matched 20 tenants with 12 landlords, and both get the security of a long-term arrangement that reduces the chance of evictions and the need for emergency council-run accommodation.

The council has also joined forces with around 30 community organisations to launch London's first joint welfare and food club called The Food Stop, and we have plans to launch several more of these in the next year.

Just as councils new to Universal Credit will have to adapt, so we are making a good fist of this bad policy in Croydon.

But the bottom line is there is not enough money or support from the government. For example, we had to again write to the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) this month

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### December 2018

---

because it still owes us more than £1m in unpaid housing benefit subsidy from when Universal Credit was launched here. That does not bode well for other councils about to take the plunge.

Moreover, we are having to dip into our own stretched resource because the DWP has woefully underfunded Universal Credit in Croydon. Last year, Croydon had to spend almost £1m of council money to top up the inadequate funding we received in discretionary housing payments from the DWP. This year, we will have to add another £700,000.

This money goes to help some of Croydon's most vulnerable people, but it would not be necessary if the government funded us properly in the first place. It is not right that Croydon's taxpayers are having to foot the bill for failed government policies.

Recently the DWP stopped giving councils like Croydon a share of its universal support funding that previously went to both local authorities and Citizens Advice working together to help benefit claimants.

This unilateral decision shows DWP does not grasp the complex partnership that work at a local level to limit the damage caused by Universal Credit.

The painful lesson we have learned in Croydon is that Universal Credit can have an immediate, devastating effect that requires action now.

So, what do we believe the chancellor should do? The fact remains that Universal Credit needs rethinking or scrapping entirely. Sadly, as the latter is unlikely, the chancellor must properly fund this badly planned policy or risk sending not just struggling families into deeper debt but councils too.

# Homes & Gateway Services

## Cabinet Member Bulletin

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### December 2018

---

## Update on Brick by Brick

### Fairfield Halls

The Fairfield Halls refurbishment is on track to complete in line with the construction contract programme completion date of 31st August 2019.

The current phase of the programme involves a significant increase in on-site building works, primarily in the areas of:

- Mechanical and Electrical installation works, vastly improving the functionality of the building.
- Arnhem Gallery steel frame and concrete floor construction.
- Foundation and frame works for the new cloister on the Ashcroft Gallery side of the building.
- External cladding, building fabric and window renovation works.

Productive dialogue is also continuing with BH Live (the appointed operator) to ensure that their operator fit out works are coordinated in the allocated periods within the main contractor's programme.

Brick by Brick have arranged several tours of the site over recent months and the feedback from these has been extremely positive, with a recognition of the enormity and complexity of the refurbishment task, and an appreciation of the extent to which the works will re-establish Fairfield Halls as a regionally significant modern entertainment venue.

### Cheriton House, Homefield House and Longheath Gardens

At Longheath Gardens, next to South Norwood Country Park, BXB are building 53 new affordable homes set across 6 small sites. Construction works have now begun on three of the six sites, with groundworks, framing and blockwork in progress.

At Cheriton House, close to Thornton Heath town centre, BXB are building 24 affordable homes due for completion early summer 2019. Works are progressing well with framing, windows and roofs installed on both blocks. Work will soon start on all the internal carpentry and electrical works.

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# Homes & Gateway Services

## Cabinet Member Bulletin

### Deputy Leader, Alison Butler

#### December 2018

---

At Homefield House, BXB are building 24 new family houses and flats on this suburban site in Old Coulsdon. The development is set across four distinct areas. Works are progressing very well with several the homes now with roofs and windows complete. The remaining homes are currently being fitted out and BXB expect works to be completed by summer 2019.

### **Ravensdale & Rushden and Aukland Rise & Sylvan Hill developments launching for Croydon residents**

The first new BXB homes available for sale will be on several sites in Upper Norwood. The first units are a selection of one, two and three-bedroom apartments and family houses designed by award-winning architects HTA. Modern in style, the homes benefit from BXB's high-quality construction methodology and interior specification.

The homes include shared ownership units, also known as 'part buy, part rent', which allow the purchaser to buy a share of a property and pay rent on the rest. It's designed to help people with small deposits and lower incomes get on the property ladder.

### **Marketing suit**

Brick by Brick's new sales and marketing suite, at 62 George Street in Central Croydon, will be opening in early 2019 and will include a mock-up of a BXB apartment, including their full interior fit-out. Assistants will be on hand to talk through the range of BXB homes which will become available over time, and mortgage advisors will also be on hand to advise on financing options.