Runnymede BOROUGH COUNCIL

TENANTS

Newsletter

November 2020

For Runnymede Borough Council tenants

Investing in Runnymede homes



The Council is investing in supporting local people and enhancing the environment.

With five new flats recently completed in Addlestone, work is due to start soon on another site in the town with a pair of semi-detached houses making way for nine new flats.

As well as those homes, we are also planning:

- 10 new properties including bungalows at Ripley Avenue in Egham for tenants wanting to downsize.
- The development of studio flats for single people.
- Work inside each flat at Surrey Towers in Addlestone to maximise fire protection with additional upgrade and roof works to follow.
- Expanding Magna Carta Lettings, our in-house lettings agency, to offer a greater range of options to single people in need of affordable housing.

Example of new flats in Addlestone

Stock condition survey update

Following the Stock Condition Survey, the Council is developing a Major Works Programme. We hope to start work in the coming year on central heating and electrical upgrades and refurbishment of kitchens and bathrooms.

We will contact you if your home is included in the first phase starting in 2021.

To talk to the Council about any items in this newsletter call: 01932 83 83 83 or email: tenancy.management@runnymede.gov.uk

Our response to the Covid-19 pandemic

The Council is committed to supporting local people and running essential services, especially throughout these difficult times.

From the start, our priority in responding to Covid-19 has been the safety of residents and staff. We are following the latest government guidance. If we need to come to your home we carry out risk assessments, use PPE as appropriate and practice social distancing. However in most cases, our contact with residents is by phone or email.

Staff remain available to help and support residents even when the Civic Centre has to be closed.

During the national lockdown in the spring our front-line services: homelessness, caretaking and clearing staff responded quickly to the changing situation. Independent Retirement Living (IRL) residents received daily calls – over 14,000 calls between March and June.

Repairs

In the first lockdown, only emergency repairs and planned appointments for gas and electrical testing were carried out. The backlog of outstanding routine repairs was cleared as soon as it became possible. It has again become necessary to restrict repairs to urgent and emergency. For example:

- Total loss of electric heating or hot water.
- Total or partial loss of cold water supply.
- Total or partial loss of electrics, or unsafe electrics.
- Leaking pipes or drains.
- Blocked drain or toilet, or no other toilet that can be flushed within the property.
- Making safe items if they are dangerous e.g. windows and external doors.

If you are unsure if your repair request is urgent or an emergency, please contact us.

Help available

The effects of the pandemic mean a serious financial impact for some households. The number of tenants receiving Universal Credit has increased by over 70%. While there is no reduction in rent liability, staff will continue to offer advice to tenants in difficulty. If you are struggling with your rent, help is available. It is very important to discuss your situation with us. Please let us know if you need help at this difficult time.

For more information on how the Council support local people in these unprecedented times visit **www.runnymede.gov.uk/supportingvulnerablepeople**

Keep in touch with the latest Covid-19 guidance and help on our social sites:

@RunnymedeBC

www.facebook.com/runnymedebc/

www.linkedin.com/company/runnymede-borough-council

Like, comment and share...



Housing by numbers

Runnymede Borough Council owns and manages 2,921 properties.

In 2019/2020 we prevented 46 households from becoming homeless

In 2019/2020 215 new Council and housing association tenancies started

We collected 99.9% of the rent we expected to collect in 2019/2020

Since April 2020 we offered help to 49 households with managing their finances

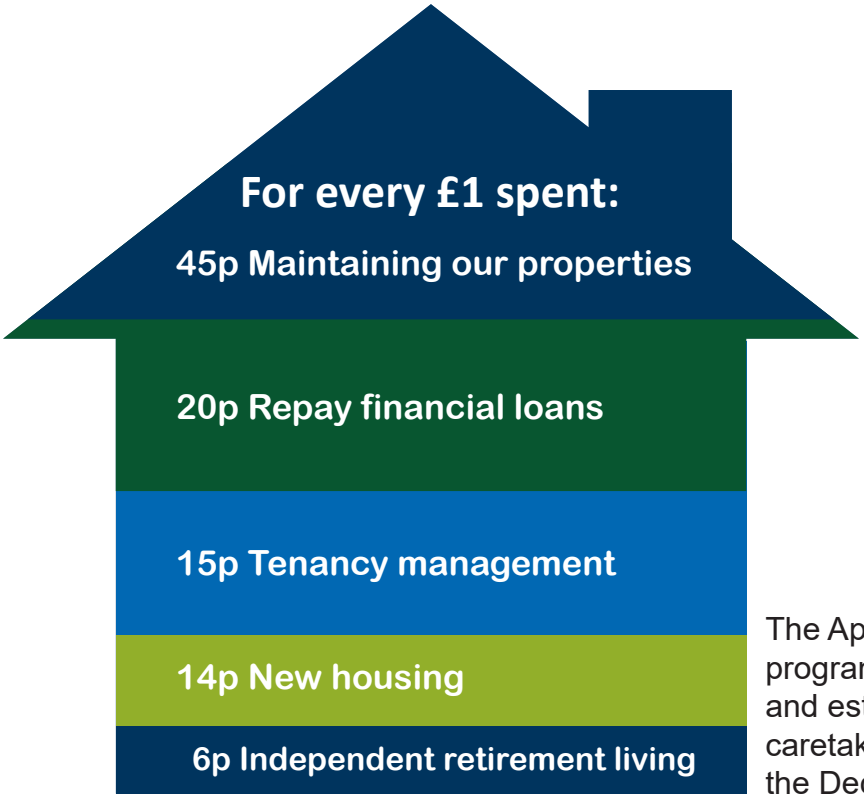
We arranged 20 tenancies through Magna Carta Lettings, our in-house lettings agency

We reduced our spending on Bed & Breakfast by 74% between April 2018 and April 2020

Runnymede tenants completed 20 Mutual Exchanges (house swaps) in 2019/20

Four properties were sold under the Right to Buy scheme

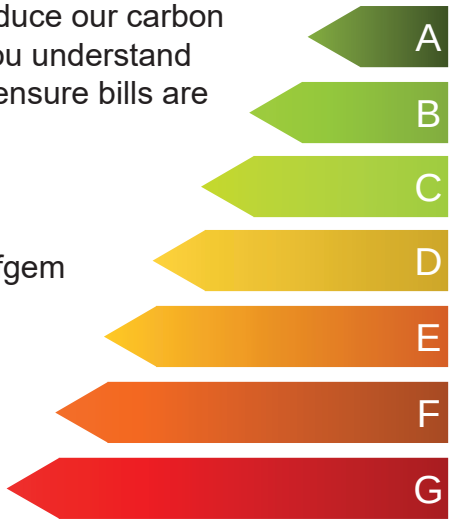
This is how every £1 of your rent was spent:



The April 2020 rent increase will help us fund a programme of works to improve our properties and estates. This will include more money for caretaking, major renovations and works to meet the Decent Homes Standard.

Energy efficiency advice for you and your home!

If we all take some small steps to cut energy and water use, we could reduce our carbon emissions and save money. Getting to know your energy bills will help you understand what you are paying, how your usage changes throughout the year and ensure bills are based on your meter readings and not estimated.



Consider switching your energy supplier:

Shop around for the best fuel tariff for your circumstances by using an Ofgem accredited price comparison website.

Check if you are eligible for an allowance on your fuel bills through the government's Cold Weather Payment, Winter Fuel Payment and/or Warm Home Discount Schemes.

Tips to cut down on energy use:

Use the thermostatic radiator valves. Adjust heating/hot water controls.

Use all electrical appliances minimally. Unplug chargers for mobile phones, laptops and tablets when they are fully charged.

LED light bulbs are the most energy efficient. Switching off lights when not needed.

Cut down on water usage: For example a fully loaded washing machine will use less energy and water than two half loads.

All this and more can be found at **www.simpleenergyadvice.org.uk** or telephone **0800 444 202**

Helping a Runnymede resident

Every week our staff hear from residents who need help and advice or whose circumstances have changed.

This example shows how we could help you, or someone you know:

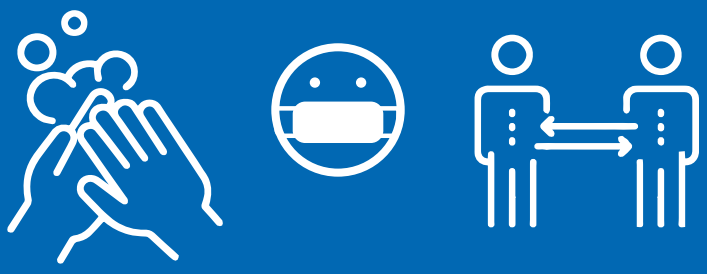
A number of our staff worked with an older man with mobility and mental health needs who was living in a two-bed property after his mum, who was the tenant, developed dementia and went into a nursing home. The family lived at the property for over 40 years but it had been neglected for some time. He now has home help twice a week and has moved to a Metropolitan Thames Valley Housing Association scheme for elderly people.

If your home is bigger than you need and you cannot afford to move, the Council can sometimes help so please talk to us.

To join the Housing Register and apply for a transfer to a more suitable property, please visit:
www.runnymede.gov.uk/allocationspolicy

If you want to move, swapping your home with another tenant might be the answer.
For more information please visit:
www.runnymede.gov.uk/mutualexchange

We must keep protecting each other



If you need help during lockdown, please call us on: **01932 838383** or visit **www.runnymede.gov.uk**

Tenancy Audits and positive outcomes

Tenancy Audits are carried out to check the person who signed the tenancy is the person who is actually living in the home. We also check the property and garden are being looked after and the welfare of the tenant. For those who do not have a tenancy for life, we review the Fixed Term tenancy to see if the household is still in the right property for their needs. Successes from the Tenancy Audit programme so far have included:

- ✓ A resident has been referred to adult social care for an assessment for a stair lift.
- ✓ A resident will be prioritised on the kitchen refurbishment programme after an audit found that his current kitchen was no longer suitable.
- ✓ A family will now have a potential fire risk alleviated by changing the layout of their property.
- ✓ A resident had a large credit on his rent account and did not realise. He has been refunded that money.

Our enforcement team works hard to keep our residents safe. They have, for example, issued Community Protection Notices regarding breaches of lockdown regulations.

Five injunctions have been taken against residents who persistently caused problems for neighbours this year.

The team also received a recent compliment for settling a noise dispute between neighbours in Englefield Green.

News in Brief

Garage numbering

We have hired CLC Contractors to re-paint the numbers on Council-owned garages.

There is no need to make an appointment as the work is outside.

Rent a garage

If you are interested in renting a garage from the Council, please call: **01932 838383** or visit: **www.runnymede.gov.uk/garagesforrent**

Repairs and Maintenance

During a lockdown, the Council can only complete essential repairs. If your repair is urgent or an emergency please contact us by phone or email in the usual way. If you are unsure if your repair is urgent, please contact us to discuss it.

Routine repairs will be reinstated in line with government guidance.

housing.repairs@runnymede.gov.uk or call: **01932 838383** (including out of hours).

Now easier to pay your rent

The Council is now all set up to accept rent by PayPal on the website.

We will also be accepting Recurring Card Payments which allows you to set up regular payments to be debited from your card without the need to call us or make repeat online payments.

Simply set up a My Payments Account on the “Pay For It” button on the Runnymede Borough Council website.

Please contact Customers Services for assistance: **01932 838383**

Remembrance Sunday

While we couldn’t mark Remembrance Sunday in the usual way this year, residents may like to know that RBC supports the Armed Forces Community Covenant for serving forces: **www.runnymede.gov.uk/ArmedForcesSupport**

Complaints and compliments

We welcome compliments and complaints about our housing services.

You can view the Council's Complaints Policy at: **www.runnymede.gov.uk/comments-complaints-and-compliments**

The Council's policy says that a complaint is "an expression of dissatisfaction about a Council service which requires a response." Complaints can be about the standard of a service, actions or lack of action by the Council or its contractors. If you need to make a complaint this can be in writing, through the website, in person or over the phone. We want tenants to be heard so please tell us if you want someone to make a complaint on your behalf.

All complaints received are reviewed so we can make improvements where possible. For example, we listened to concerns about the way we were handling complaints of anti-social behaviour and are now working with an expert advisor to improve our approach. We recently received a complaint from a new tenant that we hadn't made it clear what land was included with the tenancy. We are now using electronic mapping to improve the information we include in a Tenancy Agreement.

Complaints are looked at by a manager not involved in the original issue. They look into the details, check the Council's policy and if necessary, interview staff involved.

Occasionally we may not be able to treat an issue as a complaint if:

- it is part of legal proceedings or an insurance claim,
- the complaint has not been raised in time,and
- the complaints process has been completed.

Last year the complaints we received were:

Subject	Number of complaints
About a member of staff	3
Anti-Social Behaviour	1
Contractor delay	5
Homelessness Service	6
Housing Register	6
Property Maintenance	9
Tree Surgery	2
Total	**32**

If you are still unhappy with the Council's service as a landlord, after it has reached the final stage of the Complaints Procedure, you can take your case to The Housing Ombudsman which is set up by law to look at complaints about social landlords.

For more information visit: **www.housing-ombudsman.org.uk**

Going digital!

The Council is investing in technology to improve how we serve you.

During the next year, all residents will see improvements to the Council's website and the way we respond to enquiries. As we have got used to banks, retailers and utility suppliers being online, tenants will be able to choose to switch to some self-service options for convenience.

In future, sending publications like this newsletter in a digital format will be more convenient for most people and has environmental benefits too. Recently we asked you to update your preferences on how we should contact you; either by email, text or post. If you have not done so, please update your details here: **www.runnymede.gov.uk/Update-Tenancy-Details**

We are looking for feedback on what transactions residents would like to see online. We expect to make these services live in the coming year:

- Update your contact details
- Upload documentation and supporting correspondence
- Check your rent account
- Request a repair
- Right to Buy
- Set up a direct debit,
- Choose a payment date
- Report anti-social behaviour
- Apply for a Transfer or Mutual Exchange



RCRA
RUNNYMEDE COUNCIL RESIDENTS' ASSOCIATION
Making your views heard

DISCUSS Decide IMPROVE

Dear Resident,

I hope you are keeping well in these challenging times. Some people have and will experience exceptional circumstances. If you are struggling to pay your rent, do contact the Council to explain your difficulties. They may be able to suggest ways to help.

Last year I was re-elected as Chair of the Association of Retained Council Housing (ARCH). We get involved in looking at government policy, new initiatives like the Complaints Handling Code and ways to share best practice to raise standards across all council housing. I am also involved in the See The Person campaign which works to combat the stigma sometimes associated with those who live in social housing. If you feel you have been discriminated against because you are a tenant, please let me know.

I am pleased with the Council's plans for Going Digital as most tenants will find this very convenient, for example checking your rent account or ordering a repair online. I have been given assurances, however, that residents who can't email or use the internet will not miss out. If you would like to get involved in this project or have any comments about the Council's Housing services, I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours faithfully,

Jenny Hill

(Chairman, RCRA)

If you would like to get involved with the Residents Association, or raise any issues contact me on:
01932 568405, 07811 863565 or jennihill@ntlworld.com

Help protect the environment and your purse...recycle!

Recent recycling improvements at sites including Surrey Towers, Hampshire, Middlesex and Oaklands Courts have helped to reduce the amount of rubbish produced. New weekly food waste collections have also been introduced to divert food waste to make electricity.

See **www.runnymede.gov.uk/foodwaste** for more information.

We are keeping the existing schemes under constant review to ensure they are working well for residents. We will let you know if any more changes are made. To help promote recycling a small competition was run to design a poster to encourage more tenants to recycle. We had some great entries so deciding on a winner was very difficult. In the end, one family's collective creativity won the day and has been printed on the back page of this magazine.

We encourage you to cut it out and keep it with your bins as a reminder.

Recycling is really important, so it is essential that everyone keeps up the good work.
If you are unsure what to recycle please see **www.runnymede.gov.uk/recycling** to find out more.

Thank you for recycling!

Recycling competition winner!



Runnymede BOROUGH COUNCIL

TENANTS

Newsletter

February 2020 For Runnymede Borough Council tenants

Proud to build more Council housing



Last year marked the 100th anniversary of the Addison Act, which kick-started council house building in England and Wales. Creating more Council-owned homes in the borough is a priority and late last year tenants moved in to four new one-bedroom flats at Farm Close in Egham.

These properties are energy efficient, cost effective and have solar panels. They are ideally situated for local facilities and Staines town centre. This development follows the completion of 12 new Englefield Green homes in 2018.

This year we are developing new temporary accommodation within the borough to provide a better range of emergency housing for households that become homeless, including single people.

We have also achieved planning permission for more new homes in Addlestone and Egham, which will become available for letting in the next few years.

Could you downsize to help another family?

Priority for the new flats at Farm Close were given to social housing tenants vacating a larger home. With more than 1,000 households on the Housing register, some people with children are waiting many years for a family home. If your children have grown up and moved out, would you consider moving to a smaller property so a young family can have the space yours has benefited from?

If you would like to discuss your options for downsizing, please get in touch.

To assist people in relocating we sometimes:

- Help with the cost of your removals;
- Decorate your new property;
- Assist with a free overlap of rent;
- Arrange for the clearance of old furniture;
- Provide carpet for your new property.

For more information, contact:
housingsolutions@runnymede.gov.uk

To talk to the Council about any items in this newsletter call 01932 838383

Serving our customers

We know that having a safe and secure home is one of the most important aspects of anyone's life and that the services the Council provides for its tenants and prospective tenants are vital.

Last year we recruited extra staff in order to respond better to our customers' needs, especially those struggling to pay their rent or dealing with debt or benefit issues.

The new Housing and Neighbourhood Services team, which replaces the Tenancy Management team, includes Area Housing Managers and two Senior Area Managers. Their aim is to help and advise, support people in their tenancies, promote sustainable neighbourhoods and if necessary take enforcement action against breaches of the tenancy agreement which is our contract with each tenant.

We will be more proactive about neighbourhood issues including joint inspections between your Area Housing Manager and your Maintenance Inspector.

We will take action on tenancy fraud, which deprives those waiting for a council home.

We will be reviewing fixed term tenancies for households which do not have a tenancy for life, to see if people are still in the right property for their needs.

Advice and support

The Housing Solutions Team supports people looking for appropriate housing. As well as managing the Housing Register and dealing with applications for transfers from tenants needing a different home, the team provides housing advice and assists people who are homeless.

Janet's story is an example of how the team can help:

Janet asked the Council for help, she has a learning disability and was also at risk of losing her home. Janet previously had a bad experience sharing a house with people she didn't know but the team explained how they could help her find a room in a suitable house, with the support she needed.

A Housing Officer accompanied her to an interview with Transform, a local housing association, as she was worried about it.

Following that interview, Transform offered Janet accommodation in one of its supported housing schemes.

Now she has a safe and secure place to live, Janet has developed ambitions about what she wants to do with her life, and is actively looking for work caring for animals.

Transform is helping her find voluntary work. She is also taking steps to improve her literacy and confidence.

To find out if the Housing Solutions Team can help you, email housingsolutions@runnymede.gov.uk
To find out more about Transform visit: www.transformhousing.org.uk/ourstories

Stock Condition Survey *Q&A:*



As part of our commitment to checking homes meet the Decent Home Standard, we are currently carrying out a Stock Condition Survey of all housing properties.

What does it cover?

The age and condition of the major elements of your home such as the kitchen and bathroom, the energy efficiency of the property and any health and safety risks.

What needs to be checked?

All inside and outside areas of your home including any loft space. The survey also covers the building structure including roof, windows and doors.

How long will the survey take?

A full survey can take 90 minutes. If your time is limited the surveyor can concentrate on the internal survey first and then carry out the external survey afterwards.

Who are the surveyors?

All surveyors are directly employed by Runnymede Borough Council and will arrive at your home carrying Council photo ID.

If you are in any doubt, call the Council to check their identity.

Do not let anyone into your home unless they have ID.

Please treat your surveyor with respect.

Their role is to report on the condition of the property, not make decisions. The surveyor will bring equipment like a ladder and data recording equipment.

Will I have to take time off work?

Ideally the tenant will be at home at the time of the survey, but if this is not possible it is your responsibility to arrange for someone who you trust to be in your home while the survey is conducted. The surveyors will do their best to arrange an appointment time which is convenient for you. The surveyors can normally carry out the survey between 8 am and 5 pm Monday to Friday.

How will the information be used?

The information gathered will be used to inform our future programme of planned works. When your property is due for renewal work, we will contact you confirming your inclusion in the programme and all the details.

When will my home be surveyed?

If your home hasn't yet been surveyed, you should be contacted over the coming few weeks by a surveyor. This may be by phone or they may call at your home if they are in the area.

Day to day repairs should still be reported online or by calling Customer services on: 01932 83 83 83

Housing by numbers

In 2018/2019 Runnymede Borough Council prevented 43 households from becoming homeless.

We set up private sector tenancies for 17 homeless households, 12 of which were families.

In 2018/2019 the Council gave 261 households new tenancies.

Runnymede Borough Council owns and manages 2,921 properties.

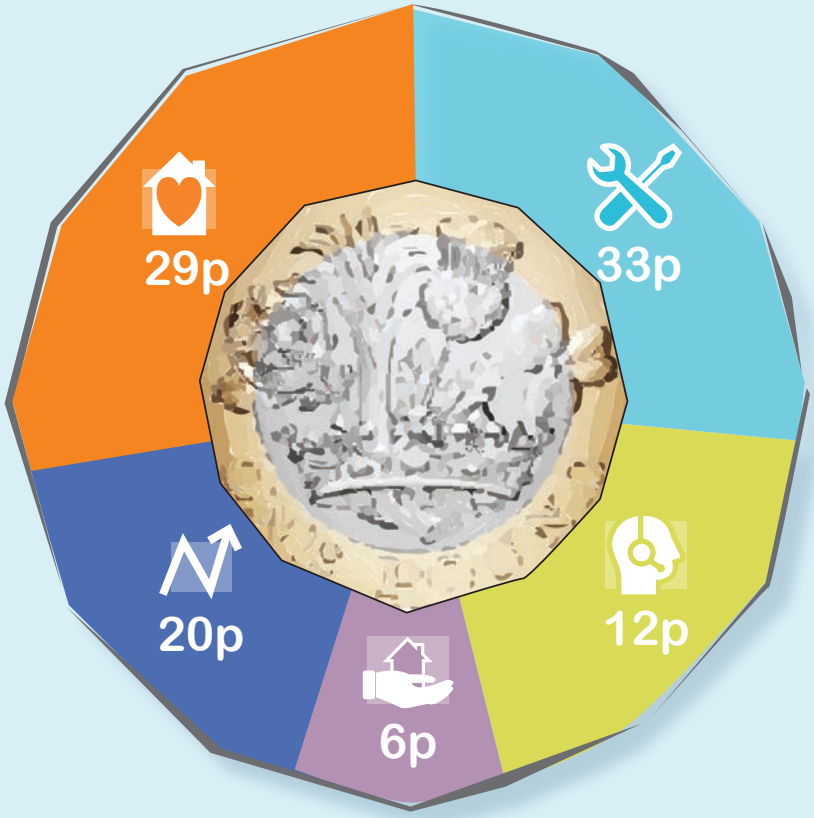
70 households (54 families with Children) who had been homeless were offered permanent social housing accommodation in 2018/2019.

We approved 12 mutual exchanges where tenants swapped properties with each other.

Working to make our communities safer, there were three evictions following the courts awarding absolute possession.

How we invested your rent last year

For every £1 spent:



- Housing Improvements
- New Housing
- Financial Loans
- Independent Retirement Living
- Tenancy Management

If you would like more information on how we plan to use your rent to improve Council Housing in Runnymede, please see our business plan: www.runnymede.gov.uk/article/14622/Strategies-and-plans

News in Brief

Kitchens and bathrooms

If your home is part of the coming improvement programme, we will contact you to discuss design and colour choices and for a pre-works survey.

Our contractor will then be in touch with a start date for the work, which should take around 14 days.
Our Liaison Officer will be in regular contact, to assist with questions or queries.

Better living in retirement

Following the modernisation of Beomonds in Chertsey, residents of the Council's other Independent Retirement Living schemes have been involved in proposals for the interior design of their communal areas.

With design suggestions from a specialist company, Access 21, tenants have given the Council their views and the final plans are being drawn up for work to start in the near future.

Repairs service

New contractors have been appointed to keep the 3,000 Council homes in good repair. When the decisions were made about which firms to appoint, both the cost to the Council for the work, and customer care and quality of service were assessed.

If you report a repair to the Council the contractor attending could be from Laker BMS, Mills BCE, K&T Heating or another specialist firm.

You may be asked to provide a photo to help resolve the problem without and inspection. For heating issues phone K&T Heating on 020 8269 5999.



News in Brief

Nectar points for local charities

Close to £1,000 worth of Nectar Points has been donated to two local charities after Housing staff at the Council saved up points on a Sainsbury's loyalty card.

The points have been transferred over to both charities' the Runnymede Food Bank and Just a Helping Hand, own Nectar cards, giving them each £450 to buy personal and essential items for their users.

Megan Bainbridge from Just a Helping Hand said: *"We feel honoured to have received the Nectar points. They have been a real blessing in providing essentials that we had run out of to give to those who are homeless or in need."*

Regulator of Social Housing update

The Council wrote a personal letter to all tenants in October explaining that the Regulator of Social Housing had reviewed our housing maintenance processes. The Regulator had concluded that there had been a breach of the required standard in some instances in respect of electrical certification, fire risk assessment work management and records on compliance with the Decent Home Standard.

We advised all tenants whether their property was affected by any of these issues and what action was needed. The discussions with the Regulator were shared with the Chair of the RCRA as the tenants' representative during the process.

Since October we have put in place an Improvement Plan to rectify all the issues raised and the Regulator has approved the steps being taken. We are speeding up the Stock Condition Survey and the programme of checking electrical certification. We are also investing in better IT to modernise our record keeping and working practices.

If you have any issues regarding the above please email: tenancy.management@runnymede.gov.uk

Six key facts about Universal Credit

1. Almost all new claims for benefits will now be for Universal Credit instead of tax credits, Housing Benefit or out-of-work benefits like Income Support, Job seeker's Allowance and Employment and Support Allowance.
2. If you get help with your rent, this will be included in your monthly payment – you will then need to pay your rent to the Council directly. Once your claim has been agreed, it's best to pay by Direct Debit the day after you get your Universal Credit payment to ensure rent is prioritised.
3. People on benefits who have a change of circumstance such as starting or leaving a job, or a partner leaving or joining the household, will have to claim Universal Credit.
4. Claimants apply for and manage their claim through an online account. You can use it to report changes and get support and use your journal to send messages to your work coach.
5. Couples living in the same household receive one payment between them and Universal Credit is paid monthly to match how most salaries are paid.
6. Only couples who have both reached pension credit qualifying age can make a new claim for pension credit and/or pension age Housing Benefit. Mixed age couples (one working age and one pension age) may claim Universal until both have reached pension age.

Rents from April 2020

This January, the Housing Committee approved a rent increase of 2.7 per cent for all properties in line with Government recommendations. This follows four years of rent decreases.

The average rent for a three-bedroom property will be £121.06 per week which is lower than it was in 2015.

Your Housing Benefit or Universal Credit will cover the increase if all other circumstances remain the same.

Letters confirming the details of the new rent are going out to all tenants soon.

Tenancy audits to combat fraud



We have launched a rolling programme of Tenancy Audits.

A Tenancy Audit is undertaken in your home to check that the person who holds the tenancy agreement is the person who is actually living there.

Housing staff carrying photo ID will visit your home. Do not let anyone into your home unless they have an ID badge. They will also ask you to prove your identity and details of who lives with you.

You can provide any of the following, one of which must have your photo on it:

- ✓ **Utility bill**
- ✓ **Bank statement**
- ✓ **Passport**
- ✓ **Birth certificate (for children)**
- ✓ **Driving licence**
- ✓ **Official document from government agency, DWP etc.**

Staff will verify your ID using a secure mobile device. They will not ask to take away any ID you show them. Staff will check your contact details and ask about your household income.

As part of the audit, the Council also needs to check your property and garden are being looked after in accordance with your tenancy agreement. They will also be on the lookout for any fire risks or safety issues.

Tenancy Audits are intended to ensure all tenants are acting fairly and no one is committing tenancy fraud which makes it harder for other people to get a home. There is a waiting list for social housing, therefore action is likely to be taken against anyone who does not have the right to be in a property, including homes being sub-let.

If the Tenancy Audit highlights fraud, overcrowding, under-occupation or issues that would benefit from referral to other agencies, we will explain what action the Council plans to take.



RCRA
RUNNYMEDE COUNCIL RESIDENTS' ASSOCIATION
Making your views heard

DISCUSS Decide IMPROVE

Dear resident,

Runnymede Council Residents Association (RCRA) is the overarching group to represent all council tenants in the borough and our aim is to make the service the Council provides the best it can be.

RCRA has been involved in the appointment of contractors. The new gas contractor, K&T Heating, has been in place from the beginning of January 2019, and I hope that, if they have been to your home, you have had a positive experience.

We also offer input on Council policy and strategy, such as the Tenancy Strategy which sets out the types of tenancy the Council offers. Following feedback from the RCRA, some of Runnymede's Independent Retirement Living schemes are being revamped. Residents in those schemes have been involved in choosing new colour schemes and styles of furniture.

One of my passions is the "See the Person" campaign. Its report, 'Overcoming the Stigma of Social Housing', is available on its website and is well worth reading. If you have experienced any prejudice as a tenant then please let me know. It is 100 years since the Addison Act first rolled out social housing in England and Wales and I believe we should do more to recognise the role it has played in strengthening our communities.

Runnymede Council is a member of the Association of Retained Council Houses (ARCH) and there is a Tenants Group. I was fortunate enough to be elected Chair of this national association recently and attended a reception at the House of Commons to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the Addison Act.

The Tenants Group have regular updates on housing legislation and have been involved in roundtable workshops to discuss ways forward with fire safety following the Grenfell Tower fire.

If you wish to become a member of the RCRA, or wish to set up a new residents' association to represent your street or building as part of the RCRA.

Yours faithfully,

Jenny Hill

(Chairman, RCRA)

Tel: 01932 568405 or 07811 863565 Email: jennihill@ntlworld.com Facebook: www.facebook.com/groups/RCRA1/