

Open Door, Autumn/Winter 2023



For the tenants and leaseholders of Cambridge City Council

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Editorial

From Anna Hill, Housing Services Manager for City Homes



You'll soon see a new Assistant Director of Housing and Homelessness on this page. But for now, let me welcome you to this Autumn/Winter edition of Open Door. As usual in Autumn, it brings an overview of the [Council's housing budget](#) last year. It shows how your rent was spent, how it was reinvested in homes, and how it compares to open market rents. You can see an overview of last year's customer [complaints](#), and how we are using them to improve services. There is also an article showing how specific services [performed](#), and information about where to find out more.

You can read about the important new [Consumer Standards](#) being introduced by the national regulator for social housing, agreed with tenant representatives nationally. The regulator will use these annually to monitor tenants' satisfaction with every social housing provider in the country. Across each year, Open Door will continue to bring you the headline insights and information required under the new Standards, as well as showing where you can find out much more, or get actively involved.

Another way we are already fulfilling the new Consumer Standards in Cambridge is by enabling you to [elect tenant and leaseholder representatives](#) onto the Council's Housing Scrutiny Committee. This edition brings bring you the details, and our final call for candidates for the Spring 2024 elections. An article from an elected tenant

reminds you why it's so important to vote, when you receive a voting pack next Spring.

We also give you an overview in this edition of how residents go about applying to rent our homes, and how we [allocate available homes](#). You can also read about the [building programme](#) that's increasing the amount of social housing in the city, as well as our specialised 'pods' of transitional housing for homeless people.

To avoid fire hazards, we bring you a very important article on how to safely [recharge electric batteries](#). This edition also brings articles on how to avoid condensation and mould, and where to get help with energy costs this winter.

You can read all about this year's [Residents' Garden Competition](#). This edition shows how these wonderful home gardeners on our estates are protecting wildlife and biodiversity. Another article shows how the Council itself is greatly reducing herbicide use, and invites you to do the same in your own garden.

With best wishes,

Anna

Open Door delivering new Consumer Standards for Tenants

A new national framework of Consumer Standards will come into force in April 2024, to help maintain high standards in social housing across the country. The national regulator for social housing will oversee how every social landlord is performing against these new Standards. One of the ways that Cambridge City Council will meet the Standards is through the information you'll receive in Open Door, which goes to all the City Council's tenants and leaseholders three times per year.

A Residents' Editorial Panel of council tenants and leaseholders will continue to oversee the content of every edition of Open Door, ensuring it reflects residents'

needs and fulfills the requirements of the new Consumer Standards. To participate, send feedback or suggest articles, please email opendoor@cambridge.gov.uk

Receive Open Door electronically

Why not receive Open Door by email instead of on paper? It's easy to read on any device with wifi, at the same time saving on paper and carbon footprint. To receive it by email instead of post, visit <https://camcit.co/opendooremail>

One copy of Open Door is sent to each council home. To request another copy for a joint tenant, please email opendoor@cambridge.gov.uk

Offer of free mobile and wifi data

Libraries can give free data

Your local library (via the National Databank) can now provide you with free data for your mobile phone or wifi device if you are over 18, have a low household income and...

- have insufficient internet access at home, or
- have insufficient internet access away from home, or
- can't afford your monthly top-up or contract

This offer can give you access to free mobile data, texts and calls for up to 12 months. It's a bit like a 'food bank', but for internet connection data rather than food. Community organisations can also apply to access the databank, enabling them to provide data to people in their communities who need it.

Over half a million people are already using the offer. Many vital services such as benefits, health care and training require you to be online. Both schools and

employers also expect you to use the internet. But with increasing pressure on the cost of living, many struggle to afford all the data they need on their internet devices.

For more information on this offer, visit www.goodthingsfoundation.org/databank or contact:

- Cambridge Central Library, 7 Lion yard, CB2 3QD
- Cambridge Online, Hester Adrian Centre, Hawthorn Way, CB4 1AX
- Cambridge Online at Citizens Advice Bureau, 66 Devonshire Road, CB1 2BL

If you don't have access to a computer, tablet or smart phone or are unsure how to use them, the charity Cambridge Online can help at little or no cost to you. You can phone them at 01223-300407.



Are you using your online Housing Account?

Council tenants and leaseholders can register for your own personal Housing Account online at <https://housing.cambridge.gov.uk/housing/www/dashboard> A short video shows how to register. Then, online, you can easily:

- request a repair, booking your appointment slot

- follow the progress of your repair
- check your account balance and print statements
- make payments
- communicate with council staff

For wider City Council services, there is also the My Cambridge portal on the Council's website. It's easy to register, in the top right-hand corner of the Council's homepage at www.cambridge.gov.uk

Or just type my.cambridge.gov.uk into your search engine's address box. On there, you can, for instance:

- manage your Council Tax account
- claim benefits
- notify about a change of circumstances
- report a missed bin collection
- report issues in streets or parks

Meanwhile, the Customer Service Centre in Regent Street is open for appointments from Wednesday to Friday.

Zero items in communal areas

To avoid the risk and tragedy of fires in social housing, residents are not allowed to leave or store anything in communal areas on council estates.

Left items are a danger to all, both as fire hazards and as obstacles that can block emergency services' access to homes.

The Council has a 'Zero Tolerance Policy' on this, with legal powers to dispose of the items and fine offenders. A specialist officer implements this on estates (details below).

Communal areas like walkways, stairs, balconies, storage areas, paths, gardens and drying areas must be kept completely clear at all times of day and night. Items like bikes, pushchairs, prams, buggies, shopping trolleys, rubbish bags or bins must never be left there, even briefly.

This applies to small items around front doors, like toys, carpets and plant-pots. It also includes large items awaiting disposal like washing machines, fridges or mattresses. Never store bins near properties, windows or doors. And fire doors to escape routes must never be wedged open. Bicycles, mopeds or motorbikes must never be stored or serviced in communal areas other than the designated stores provided by the Council. Mobility scooters must be stored either inside the home or away from communal areas.

This is the Council's process for removing items left in communal areas:

- Items are tagged with a deadline for the resident to remove them.
- Otherwise, the Council will remove them, charging the resident (or all the block's residents) for the cost of this.
- Complaints are investigated to identify who is littering or fly-tipping: fines for offenders are up to £400.

The Council provides a Bulky Waste Collection service disposing of large items for £30, plus £5 per extra item. And the Council's Neighbourhood Clean-Up Events help you dispose of items for free: see www.cambridge.gov.uk/neighbourhood-clean-up-events

To become a volunteer Resident Inspector, reporting any estate problems to the Council, email resident-involvement@cambridge.gov.uk or phone 01223-458323.

What you as a resident can do...

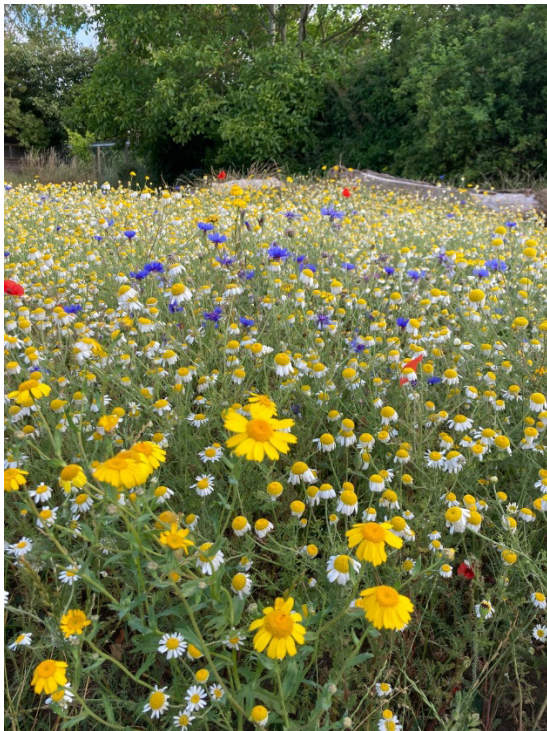
Report left items or flytipping in internal communal areas: email Jamie.Lambert@cambridge.gov.uk or phone 01223-457000.

For flytipping in external communal areas of estates, report online at www.cambridge.gov.uk/report-flytipping or phone 01223-457000.

To complain about communal building cleaning services, email cs@goshenmultiservices.com The Council will also see the complaint.

Arrange a Bulky Waste Collection at www.cambridge.gov.uk/arrange-a-bulky-waste-collection or by phoning 01223-457000.

Type 'Zero Tolerance Policy' into the Search box at www.cambridge.gov.uk to read the details of the Council's Zero Tolerance Policy on items left in communal areas.



How was your rent re-invested in 2022/23?

Average weekly social rent for a 2-bedroom council home in Cambridge: £112

Proportion re-invested by the Council for improving kitchens & bathrooms, sheltered housing, building new homes, etc.: £59

For day to day repairs & maintenance, inspections, preparing properties to re-let, etc.: £25

For paying interest on the debt of the Housing Service: £16

For managing tenancies, lettings, anti-social behaviour, resident involvement & support services: £8

For other costs in providing social housing as a Council: £4

Value for money of Cambridge council rent?

Average weekly social rent for 2-bed Cambridge council home, March 2023: £111.47

Average weekly rent for 2-bed home on open market, March 2023: £329.50

(This open market rent amount is taken from Cambridge City Council report 'Key Facts - Private Rented Housing', March 2023)

How was the overall housing budget invested in homes?

77% on building or buying more council homes

17% on 'Decent Homes' programme that improves kitchens, bathrooms, doors and windows

4% on other investments in homes

2% on improving estates through the Estates Improvement Scheme

New national standards for social housing

After the tragedy of the Grenfell Tower fire in 2019, and the death of a toddler attributed to mould in his council home in 2020, the government created a national framework for maintaining Consumer Standards in social housing across the country. A national regulator oversees how social landlords are performing against these standards.

Tenants around the country helped to shape these regulations, which cover both your home as a physical building (its safety, thermal comfort, repairs, etc.) and your customer experience (of respect, being listened to and kept informed, etc.). These Consumer Standards cover your:

- Home – the quality of accommodation and repairs and maintenance
- Tenancy – how homes are allocated, and tenancies and tenure are managed
- Neighbourhood and Community – issues around communal areas, anti-social behaviour and neighbourhoods
- Tenant Involvement and Empowerment – customer service, complaints handling, and tenants' rights and involvement
- 'Tenant Satisfaction Measures' – reaching out to survey your personal satisfaction with aspects like repairs, safety checks and complaints

Cambridge tenants are involved in regulating

At Cambridge City Council, a range of both elected and volunteer tenant representatives have for decades been heavily involved - both at a high level and locally on estates - in decision-making, monitoring the performance of services and helping to keep up standards in your council housing. You can see some of their activities in articles in this edition. This tenant involvement is a formal requirement of the Consumer Standards for social housing.

New Consumer Standards from April 2024

To improve and build on the Standards above, the social housing regulator will, from April 2024, oversee four new Consumer Standards, currently being consulted upon. They are for:

- Safety and Quality – for safe, quality homes and quality services
- Transparency, Influence and Accountability – for open information, fairness and respect, an easy complaints process, and tenants influencing decision making
- Neighbourhood and Community – for landlords' collaboration with partners to create safe, well-maintained neighbourhoods
- Tenancy – for fair allocation and letting of homes, and management of tenancies

There will also be a new Code of Practice for social housing providers.

Future editions of Open Door, which goes to all the City Council's tenants and leaseholders three times per year, will align their information to explain and help deliver the new Consumer Standards above. Please email us your feedback and any requests or suggestions for articles at opendoor@cambridge.gov.uk

How are services performing?

Together with councillors and resident representatives, the Council sets performance targets for each of its service areas. The examples below show, for instance, whether services reached their targets in the period of January to March 2023. (Some measures are affected by external factors, obviously, such as the cost of living raising the number of rough sleepers in the city.)

Repairs appointments kept: 91.4%

Target was: 90%

% of repairs that had appointments: 96.7%

Target was: 96%

Emergency repairs done in target time 96%

Target was: 99%

Properties taken back due to illegal subletting: 4

Rent overdue: 2.68%

Down from: 3.03%

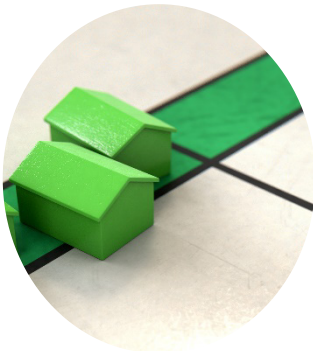
Rough sleepers: 227

Target was: a maximum of 135

With the help of resident representatives, council managers monitor dozens of performance measures like these, to see what they can do to keep up performance and productivity. Forthcoming editions of Open Door will bring you a selection of these performance ratings.

Volunteer tenants and leaseholders work with the Council to do this sort of monitoring, and are always keen for more residents to join them. If you are interested

in getting involved to have your say, please email resident-involvement@cambridge.gov.uk or phone 01223-458323.



Open Door and the new Consumer Standards

A previous article explained that, to improve and maintain the quality of social housing, the government is creating new Consumer Standards for Social Housing. They are a detailed set of Standards that social housing all over the country must meet from April 2024.

Open Door will bring you regular articles explaining these Standards, and how your landlord is working to meet them. They include a Standard for Transparency, Influence & Accountability, which Open Door in particular can help deliver for residents. This Standard about information and communication requires:

- Engagement with tenants - taking tenants' views into account in decision-making about how landlord services are delivered
- Clear information about landlord services - to help tenants understand what to expect from their landlord, how best to use their services, and how to hold their landlord to account
- Performance information - so that tenants can see and measure how services are performing against targets

- Easy complaints process - kept simple and accessible, so that all tenants are told how to make a complaint if they need to

This edition of Open Door includes articles on all four aspects of this Standard for Transparency, Influence & Accountability. As explained in an earlier article, there are also new Standards for:

- Safety and Quality
- Neighbourhood and Community
- Tenancies

Future editions of Open Door will tell you more about these too. Groups of resident representatives work with the Council to monitor and drive up performance measures and standards in each of these areas. Please do join them if you are interested in being involved. Just email your Resident Involvement Manager at resident-involvement@cambridge.gov.uk or phone 01223-458323.

To view the full new Consumer Standards for Social Housing online visit www.gov.uk/government/consultations/consultation-on-the-consumer-standards

Making a complaint

As part of the government's new Consumer Standards for Social Housing, landlords must provide a complaints process that is easy to use, and not intimidating. Cambridge City Council genuinely values complaints, because they highlight gaps in services and enable us to make improvements.

To read the Council's Annual Complaints Report 2022/23, overviewing a year's complaints up to March '23, visit www.cambridge.gov.uk/compliments-complaints-and-suggestions



With 294 complaints in all, most were dealt with straightforwardly. But 26 were complicated enough to be 'escalated' for more detailed treatment. Overall:

Household repairs caused 135 complaints

Delays by the Council caused 23% of complaints

Delays by contractors caused 17% of complaints

Poor communication caused 13% of complaints

Meanwhile, the next article below shows some of the actions being taken as a result of complaints, to improve the service areas complained about.

Using complaints to improve services

To improve on areas complained about, like those listed above...

- The repairs service is working on shortening their response-time for repairs. And if delays do happen, they will communicate better the reasons why.
- Poor communication around repairs and maintenance was prominent in last year's complaints. One way this is being tackled is by improving communication internally between teams in Customer Services and Repairs.

- The Council is also working on managing better the performance of its external contractors.
- Meanwhile at City Homes, neighbour disputes were among the top three complaints last year. So City Homes is now liaising more actively with the Council's Anti-Social Behaviour service to tackle cases before they become problematic.
- Managing customers' expectations is another part of good communication. Many 'complaints' arise because customers don't realise that what they are requesting is not actually part of the Council's services. A certain number of complaints tend to be about things the City Council isn't actually responsible for. But they are important too, as they highlight where we need to show customers more clearly what our services are, and how best to use them. So managers are taking more initiative now to communicate to residents what their services actually are, and what they are not responsible for.

How to make a complaint

Please try first to resolve the problem with the staff you have been dealing with in the first instance. But if you end up dissatisfied with the standard of a service, actions, or lack of actions by the City Council or our staff, please then let us know at www.cambridge.gov.uk/compliments-complaints-and-suggestions or by phoning us at 01223-457000. We will do our best to put things right, and make sure the same thing doesn't happen again to you or to someone else.

To make a complaint, you just tell us...

- your name and contact details
- the details of your complaint
- what you would like us to do to put things right

- whether you have raised this issue with us before and if so, who was dealing with it

We aim to reply to all complaints within 10 working days. If we need longer, we will tell you why. We will also let you know who is dealing with your complaint.

Resident Elections – Remember to vote, or stand for election!

Resident rep elections

In early 2024, an independent electoral organisation will again run citywide elections for you to elect five council tenant representatives and one council leaseholder representative onto the City Council's Housing Scrutiny Committee.

Every four years, every council tenant and leaseholder home in the city receives this Freepost voting pack with information about the resident candidates, so you can choose your resident representatives.

Unlike most other councils, Cambridge City has these six council residents, elected by their peers, who sit and vote on the Housing Scrutiny Committee alongside City Councillors. They help to make the top decisions about your council housing, and play a crucial role in helping to shape the housing service. They help ensure that the estates' residents are kept at the heart of decision-making.

The Council very much hopes that you will vote, but also that you will consider standing to be elected as a resident representative yourself... The Housing Scrutiny Committee needs people from every background. No prior experience or formal qualifications are needed. If elected, you will receive an induction programme, with ongoing support and training to help you perform your role. Elected resident reps also receive an allowance for their time.

To stand for election

Applicants must:

- be a Cambridge City Council tenant or leaseholder
- not be behind with paying their rent or any service-charges that are due
- sign and keep to a Code of Conduct for the Housing Scrutiny Committee
- agree to represent the interests of all City Council residents, not just those of their own locality or their own personal agenda
- be able to attend 12 meetings per year, taking about 32 hours of time in all per year; the Scrutiny Committee meets 4 times per year at fixed times on weekday evenings, but the 8 background meetings can be arranged flexibly around resident reps' availability
- prepare for the meetings by reading Committee agendas and reports: each of the 4 Committee meetings in the year can require a few hours' background reading beforehand
- accept relevant training and ongoing support provided for free by the Council

Other roles for you

If you don't want to be a high-level elected resident rep, there are other rewarding roles available that you can join more easily, without going through elections. They include...

- the Residents' Panel: influencing council housing policies and services, they meet several times a year online

- Resident Inspectors, Green Inspectors, Recycling Champions: inspecting work and improving services on their estates
- Residents' Associations and community groups on council estates across the city: to set up a new one, funding and support are available
- Digital Champions: they get trained up for free, to teach other residents how to use computers

To get involved in any of these roles, please email resident-involvement@cambridge.gov.uk or phone 01223-457343.

How to stand as a candidate

The window for applications to stand for the Housing Scrutiny Committee resident elections will be open from 1st November 2023 to 31st January 2024.

Application forms and information will be available on the City Council's website at www.cambridge.gov.uk/resident-involvement or can be posted to you if you phone 01223-457343.

To apply, candidates must complete an application form, supply a passport-style photo, and write a short statement saying why they are standing for election as a resident representative. (Help is available for anyone wanting assistance to do their application.)

For the elections, candidate statements and photos will be printed on a ballot paper and posted to all the City Council's tenant and leasehold homes.

After voting has closed, successful candidates will be informed and their names will be listed on the City Council's website.

If you are interested in applying as a candidate or would like to find out more about the role, please phone the Council's Resident Engagement Officer at 01223-457343 or email resident-involvement@cambridge.gov.uk

Message from elected tenant rep Diana Minns

'Do you care about where you live? Do you want to make things better? Do you think council tenants should be heard loud and clear by the City Council?

Would you like to represent the needs and views of tenants? To be involved in deciding how our services should be run? If yes is your answer to even some of these questions, why not become an elected tenant representative on the Council's Housing Scrutiny Committee?

I've been one for some time and I've enjoyed every minute of it! It gives me the chance to convey what tenants want and need. When council policies and procedures are being set, I bring to it our experience of actually receiving council services. We know the day to day realities of living in a council home.

We five tenant representatives and one leaseholder rep sit alongside councillors, voting on the proposals affecting our homes. One of us also chairs that part of the meeting - a level of equality for tenants that is unique to Cambridge.

Does it sound daunting? Too much work? Be reassured that we get lots of support, including training on how the Council works, how its housing finances work, visits to new-build housing sites, and briefings with council managers before our Committee meetings. We also meet regularly with the Resident Engagement Manager to look at issues affecting residents.

We are supported by the circles of many other tenant and leaseholder reps on estates who are also involved in monitoring the quality of services we receive from

the Council as our landlord. Most of us elected reps on the Committee are involved in other aspects of Resident Involvement too, such as:

- reviewing and assessing council services
- drawing up policies (eg. one tenant rep had experience tackling hoarding, and helped the Council to create their policy on it)
- being Resident Inspectors, checking the quality of cleaning in communal areas and how an estate is being run

We'd love you to consider standing for election onto the Housing Scrutiny Committee. Or if not, why not volunteer to join the wider resident involvement network and activities? You'll be more than welcome, whichever you choose to do.

With kind regards, Diana'



What do elected residents do?

The Housing Scrutiny Committee (ie. your 6 elected tenant and leaseholder representatives plus 9 City Councillors) meet four times a year to debate and vote on major decisions about your council housing in the city.

Committee members first read the background papers and reports in advance at home. They can then attend an informal briefing with council managers to get any questions answered or issues clarified.

At the Housing Scrutiny Committee meeting, they then have time to question and discuss each topic in turn before voting on it. Agendas and minutes are always published online at <https://democracy.cambridge.gov.uk/ieDocHome.aspx>

For instance, they debated and voted on the topics below at their September 2023 meeting (but note this was an unusually long agenda!):

- redevelopment options for bringing the Council's Ekin Road estate up to today's housing standards
- a petition by a residents' group against those Ekin Road redevelopment proposals
- time for questions from members of the public
- how council services are complying with national standards and legal requirements
- a 'Compliance Dashboard' report, for monitoring this compliance
- findings of the Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman on a case about a dropped kerb in Cambridge
- budget report from Cambridge's Housing Development Agency
- update on a housing development scheme at Fanshawe Road

- a report on purchasing some housing under 'Section 106' rules
- a rooftop development 'retrofitted' to high environmental standards
- humanitarian accommodation for refugees through the city's new-build programme

Who rents newly available council homes, and how?

Applying for council housing

When council homes become available for rent in Cambridge, they are allocated through the Home-Link choice-based lettings scheme. It's a partnership with other local authorities around Cambridgeshire, but each partner's Lettings Policy is the same. To apply for council housing, applicants must first register with Home-Link.

The Lettings Policy sets out clearly and fairly who should be allocated council housing, and how the letting process is done. (To read it, just type Lettings Policy in the Search box on the Council's website at www.cambridge.gov.uk) Some properties are also covered by a Local Lettings Plan, which can further determine who is successful in bidding for a property.

Registering for Home-Link

To register for Home-Link, you complete the application form and provide all the requested documents. If your circumstances change, you can update your details on the Home-Link website.

To apply for council housing, you will usually be expected to demonstrate a 'local connection' with Cambridge. The criteria include, for instance, having lived in the city for at least 12 months, or working here, or having certain family members here for over 5 years.

Based on your circumstances, your application is placed in a priority 'Band' ranging from Bands A to D. Band A gives you the highest level of eligibility and urgency, and Band D, the lowest. This band system enables local authorities and housing associations to allocate homes in the fairest way, based on applicants' level of need. In most cases, a property will be let to the applicant who has been in the highest band for the longest period.

'Bidding' for available properties

Once your Home-link account is activated online, you can see every week which properties are available for letting. You can apply or 'bid' for up to three properties that interest you (although called 'bidding', this process doesn't involve money).

Council officers will enable you to view a property that is being offered to you, and will guide you in detail through the processes for taking on a council Tenancy Agreement and moving in.

For more information visit the Home-link website at <https://www.home-link.org.uk> or email cbl@cambridge.gov.uk or phone 01223-457917.

'Pod' homes for the homeless

Around the city, Cambridge now has several sites with state-of-the-art 'pod' homes for the homeless, donated by house-builders Hill. The pods are purpose-built for homeless people as a first step before they move on to permanent accommodation.

This year, plans were approved for four new modular homes in Hills Avenue. The land for the latest pods is owned by the City Council, and the pods have approval to remain on the site for up to five years.

Designed as transitional housing for people who would otherwise be in a hostel, pods are managed by the City Council and homelessness charity *Jimmy's*. They receive daily site visits, with a dedicated support worker on call at all times. There are also regular, random drug tests for occupants with a history of substance abuse.



For more information on support and services for the homeless, visit www.cambridge.gov.uk/homeless-people

Who got available council homes last year?

The previous articles overviewed how people apply for council homes in Cambridge, and the Lettings Policies that decide who is successful. Coming out at the other end of that application process, the following questions give a snapshot of some outcomes by March 2023. They answer, for example, the questions...

How many were applying for council housing? 2,429 applicants in the year

How many homes were let in the year? 792 homes

How many applicants applied for one-bedroom homes? 1,328 applicants

How many applicants were put into Band A level of urgency? 202 applicants

For much more information like this, or on applying for council homes or moving to another social housing home, visit www.home-link.org.uk

To move to a different council home...

- To move to a home around Cambridge, you can apply through Home-Link. But with such high demand on Home-Link, it's often better to first find a specific council tenant who's willing to swap properties with you in a Mutual Exchange. This requires an application form, a home inspection and meeting the criteria of the Council's Mutual Exchange Policy. For more information, visit www.cambridge.gov.uk/swap-your-council-home or phone 01223-457000. If moving to a smaller council home in Cambridge, you may be eligible for a grant towards moving costs.
- To move to a council home around the wider UK, use Homefinder UK, a free website service that is approved by Cambridge City Council, at <https://www.homeswapper.co.uk>

Building 500 new council homes to rent

Cambridge City Council was awarded £70 million to deliver 500 new council homes in the city, of which 316 were built in the five years up to 2018. And 1,506 new affordable homes were built by other providers in that time.

As building work rolls on, 75 more new council homes were recently finished at Campkin Road. They replaced 32 outdated homes and garages not fit for purpose. Four new council houses, 71 council flats and a new community centre now stand in their place.

The new social housing is built to the highest eco-standards. Those at Campkin Road are gas-free, super-insulated and enjoy heating and hot water via a communal

air-source heat pump. They have solar panels, triple-glazed windows, a communal garden, sedum green roofs, bird and bat boxes, and electric-vehicle charging points.

To empower 'community-led housing', the Council will also support communities wishing to bring forward their own affordable housing schemes. For more information, email housingdevelopment@cambridge.gov.uk

The Council's goal is 'to increase the supply of affordable housing for local people, to help reduce poverty, as well as replacing poor-quality properties and improving standards'. To view a short film on new social housing in Cambridge, please visit www.youtube.com/watch?v=pizIROXOJgs



Safety advice for recharging

For e-bike and e-scooter batteries

Readers may be aware of a tragic house fire that occurred in Sackville Close in Cambridge at the end of June, which sadly led to fatalities. Cambridgeshire Fire and Rescue has advised that the house fire is believed to have been caused by an electric bike that was charging. They say that some fire services and fire investigators have seen a rise in e-bike and e-scooter battery fires in recent years.

Most of these items are powered by lithium-ion batteries which can be charged in the home. On occasion, these batteries can fail catastrophically. They can explode and/or lead to a rapidly-developing fire, so you should always use them with extreme caution and follow guidance.

The Fire Service is advising residents on how to safely charge, store or dispose of products like these, to help avoid the risk of a fire starting.

Charging

- Follow the manufacturer's instructions, only use the manufacturer approved charger, and buy an official replacement charger if yours becomes damaged.
- Charge batteries while you are awake, and do not leave them to charge while you are not at home.
- Unplug your charger when it's finished charging.
- Do not overcharge your battery – check the manufacturer's instructions for charge times.
- Ensure you have working smoke alarms.
- Charge or store your e-bike or e-scooter in a safe place such as an unoccupied room. Ensure you have working smoke alarms in the same room and a door that you can keep closed.
- Do not cover chargers or battery packs when charging as this could lead to overheating or even a fire.
- Do not charge batteries or store your e-bike or e-scooter near combustible or flammable materials.

- Do not overload socket outlets or use inappropriate extension leads (use un-coiled extensions and ensure the lead is suitably rated for what you are plugging in to it).
- If there is an e-bike, e-scooter or lithium-ion battery fire, do not attempt to extinguish the fire. Get out, stay out, and call 999.

Storage

- Do not store or charge e-bikes or e-scooters on escape routes inside your home, or in communal areas of a multi-occupied building. If there's a fire, it can affect people's ability to escape.
- Store e-bikes and e-scooters and their batteries in a cool place. Avoid storing them in excessively hot or cold areas.
- Follow manufacturer's instructions for the storage and maintenance of lithium-ion batteries if they are not going to be used for extended periods of time.

Buying

- Buy e-bikes, e-scooters and chargers and batteries from reputable retailers.
- Many fires involve counterfeit electrical goods. Items which don't meet British or European standards pose a huge fire risk. While genuine chargers (or battery packs) may cost more, it's not worth putting your life at risk and potentially destroying your home by buying a fake charger to save a few pounds.
- If buying an e-bike conversion kit, purchase from a reputable seller and check that it complies with British or European standards. Take particular care if buying from online auction or fulfilment platforms. Also be aware that if buying separate components, you should check that they are compatible.

- Register your product with the manufacturer to validate any warranties – batteries are usually included in warranties. Registering makes it easier for manufacturers to contact you in the event of safety or recall information.

- Check any products you have bought are not subject to a product recall. You can do this by checking Electrical Safety First’s website or the government website.

Damage and disposal

- Batteries can be damaged if you drop them or if you crash your e-bike or e-scooter. Where the battery is damaged, it can overheat and catch fire without warning. Check your battery regularly for any signs of damage and if you suspect it is damaged, it should be replaced and should not be used or charged.

- If you need to dispose of a damaged or end of life battery, don’t dispose of it in your household waste or normal recycling. These batteries, when punctured or crushed, can cause fires in bin lorries, recycling and waste centres. Your e-bike or e-scooter manufacturer may offer a recycling service.

Alternatively, check the City Council’s website for suitable battery recycling arrangements in your area.



Preventing mould

3 steps to stop condensation

Step 1. Reduce moisture

Get outdoors: Dry laundry outdoors if possible. Or hang it in a sunny room with the door closed and a window slightly open. (Don't ever put it on radiators with windows closed - it's a recipe for mould!)

Wipe any condensation off windows and sills every morning. Dry kitchen and bathroom surfaces whenever they get wet.

Cook only with pan lids on. In kettles, only boil as much water as you need (saving on electricity as well as on condensation). Turn the kettle off promptly once boiling.

Fans & vents: Always put an extractor fan on when showering, bathing or cooking. Or keep a window slightly open nearby, closing doors to other rooms. Use a dehumidifier if you have one.

Baths: run cold water before the hot, to reduce condensation by 90%!

Step 2. Increase airflow

Windows: Always open some windows daily to let moisture out and fresh air in - ideally first thing in the morning, even if just for 10 minutes.

Furniture: Don't put any furniture, including beds, against outside walls, if possible. Leave a gap for airflow between all walls and furniture.

Step 3. Heat your home enough, and steadily

Heating: Keep your heating on for longer stretches at a lower temperature, rather than in short bursts at higher temperatures.

It's also more cost-effective, as well as helping against damp and mould. Try to keep all rooms steadily between 18° and 21°.

Insulation: If you can, use thick carpet with a good thermal underlay and heavy, lined curtains: these will keep your home warmer for less.



How much added moisture is in your home every day..?

Drying clothes indoors adds 9 pints of moisture to indoor air! Cooking and boiling a kettle adds 6 pints. A bath or shower adds 2 pints. Washing dishes adds 2 pints. And 2 people breathing adds 3 pints. That totals 22 pints of extra moisture indoors daily!

Removing existing mould

The 3 steps above are by far the best way to prevent mould, namely:

- reduce moisture indoors
- ventilate well

- keep your home warm enough

But if your home already has mould, to remove it:

- wash and wipe away any mould using a special fungicidal wash or spray
- specialised paints can prevent or delay the return of mould
- also take all the steps advised in the article above to reduce indoor moisture and condensation, or else the mould will inevitably grow back

But if the problem persists despite you taking all these steps, do contact the Council to arrange a visit. A repair visit and some lifestyle advice should soon get your home free of mould and damp.

To request an appointment for a home visit about mould or condensation, please email the Council's specialist staff at condensation@cambridge.gov.uk or phone 01223-457000.

(For other types of repairs, you can book a repairs visit online at www.cambridge.gov.uk/request-a-repair-for-your-council-home)

Leaseholders

Are you fully insured?

After the tragic fire this year at Sackville Close, leaseholders are reminded to ensure they are adequately insured. The Council is responsible for organising buildings insurance (you pay a premium for it, listed with your service charge). It covers the cost of repairing or rebuilding your home if damaged by an 'insured peril'. The policy is available at www.cambridge.gov.uk/building-insurance-at-your-leasehold-property

Note that it does not cover your home's contents (including most flooring). If your property becomes uninhabitable, the policy won't cover accommodation costs while your home is repaired or rebuilt. And if your property is empty for more than 30 days, this will invalidate parts of the buildings insurance. 'Malicious damage' or damage caused by 'escape of water from any tank apparatus or pipe' will not then be covered.

Fences or boundaries are not covered by this buildings insurance. If your lease includes a private garden with trees, it is your responsibility to maintain them. If one causes injury or damage to someone else's property, this is not covered under the buildings insurance and you will be liable.

If you rent out your property, Landlord's Insurance is recommended. But seek advice from an insurance specialist to ensure you are neither under- nor over-insured. Leaseholders who have a joint buildings and contents insurance policy might potentially be doubly insured.

The most common leasehold insurance claim is due to a leak from a property above. If you experience this, alert your neighbour immediately. If they are a council tenant, or if the leak is from the roof, the Council is responsible for the repair. But if the property above is leasehold like yours, the repair is likely to be the leaseholder's responsibility.

To claim under the buildings insurance you must submit the form (available on our website) within 30 days of the incident. There is a £75 excess fee to pay, and a council surveyor may visit to check the damage. Usually you arrange the repair and the Council reimburses you, minus the £75 excess fee.

For more information, visit www.cambridge.gov.uk/building-insurance-at-your-leasehold-property, email leasehold.services@cambridge.gov.uk or phone 01223-457835.

Become an elected leasehold rep

Every four years, all the City Council's leaseholders citywide are sent a voting pack to elect their leaseholder representative to sit on the Council's Housing Scrutiny Committee. On the Committee, the leaseholder representative votes alongside 9 City Councillors and 5 elected tenant representatives.

The Committee meets four times a year to debate and vote on major decisions about the city's council housing and estates. This important leaseholder election is coming up again in early 2024, when council leaseholders will receive a pack in the post enabling them to vote. Please do remember to vote: it's a really significant voice that can have a big impact in defending leaseholders' interests for a four-year term of office on the Housing Scrutiny Committee.

Stand as a candidate

Why not stand as a candidate yourself? No prior experience or qualifications are needed. The elected leaseholder representative receives an allowance for their time, and you receive full support and training as you go along.

See the article [earlier in this edition](#) for more information about the role, and details of how to apply to stand as a candidate.

You can also see there, as an example, the list of topics that the Housing Scrutiny Committee debated and voted on at their last meeting (though note that this meeting happened to have an exceptionally long agenda!).

The window for applications to stand for the leaseholder election will be open from 1st November 2023 to 31st January 2024.

Application forms and information will be available on the City Council's website at www.cambridge.gov.uk/resident-involvement or they can be posted to you if you phone 01223-457343.

No more toxic garden chemicals

Residents' gardens help nature to recover.

This year again, council tenants and leaseholders entered stunning gardens for the Residents' Garden Competition. It promotes nature-friendly gardens that use the natural methods in the article further below.

Nature-friendly gardens on council estates are building up a patchwork of refuges for wildlife across the city, as well as being a private haven for the residents who tend them. See the article below to find out more about this shift to safer, healthier gardening around the city.

The article is by residents who are gardening safely without toxic chemicals - and want to help you do the same. So why not try adopting some of their tips from the easy action list here on the right?

Next Spring, you can get your 2024 Garden Competition entry form from www.cambridge.gov.uk/tenant-and-leaseholder-garden-competition or email resident-involvement@cambridge.gov.uk or phone 01223-458323.



Winning Gardens, 2023

Nature & wildlife ~ Bridewell Road

Environment-friendly ~ Godwin Way

Communal Garden ~ Fernwood

Established Garden ~ Mowbray Road

New Garden ~ Apthorpe Way

Tubs or Baskets ~ Wulfstan Way

Anna Vine-Lott Cup ~ Godwin Way

Home gardeners on council estates are helping Nature to recover

They...

- stop using chemical pesticides, herbicides or fertilisers: as well as potentially harming human health, these harm bees, butterflies, birds, hedgehogs, toads and other wildlife.

- mow a lot less: they let daisies, buttercups, dandelions, plantain and nettles come through to feed birds, bees, butterflies and other insects.
- grow natural flowers with single blooms: bees and butterflies can't feed from 'double' blooms.
- compost garden and kitchen waste, for free fertiliser that improves their soil.
- collect rainwater, to water for free.
- put mulch down to prevent weeds, protect plants and reduce watering.
- grow their own organic veg to save money and eat healthily; they use physical barriers like fleece, rather than chemicals that poison wildlife like thrushes and hedgehogs.



Residents change to safe, healthy gardening

Here's a message from local residents Julia and Ben, who are active in the group Pesticide Free Cambridge...

"Gardens give us such pleasure - the greenery and flowers, the birds, bees and butterflies. But the way we garden can harm wildlife and our own health, if we use chemicals. Some people use dangerous herbicides like Roundup, just to get rid of unwanted plants or 'weeds'. But legal actions are being taken over its ingredient glyphosate, linked to cancer.

Others spray insecticides onto their roses to kill aphids. Paving is doused in insecticidal powder to kill ants. And toxic pellets are sprinkled liberally on soil to kill slugs. But growing evidence shows these toxic chemicals can be a huge problem both for your own health, and for the environment. It makes sense: they are extremely harmful to the plants and insects they target, but can also harm other creatures, and ourselves!

Chemicals in insecticidal powders may be highly toxic to our nervous system. They are being linked to autism, cancers and Parkinson's Disease. And powders are very volatile, floating far beyond the application point. Pesticides are a threat to us all but groups like children, pregnant women, and those with allergies and chronic conditions can be particularly vulnerable.

Slug pellets kill hedgehogs and thrushes, both in danger of going extinct in the UK. Pesticides have caused a catastrophic loss of bees and butterflies in the last 25 years. But we need these insects to pollinate crops and bring joy to gardens!

But you can put the pesticides away and still enjoy your garden - there are plenty of effective alternatives. Ant nests a problem? A mix of bicarbonate of soda and sugar is extremely effective, and harmless to all but the ants. Aphids on your roses? Grow pollinator-friendly plants and watch ladybirds, wasps, hoverflies and blue tits clear the aphids for you. Or simply spray the aphids away with water! Caterpillars on your cabbages? Just pick them off. Slugs? Put down beer-traps. Native wildflower 'weeds' like dandelions, buttercups and ground nettles? Welcome them, as some of the most nectar-rich flowers a bee can find! Other 'weeds' on patios or driveways? Just hoe them up, or drop boiling water on them.

For lots more tips, download the free guide to chemical-free gardening at www.pesticidefreecambridge.org/pesticide-free-guide

To protect human health and the environment, the City Council has stopped using herbicides in most of the city. (Trial council estates are in Newnham, Arbury, West Chesterton and Trumpington, with the rest to come later, hopefully.) But our home gardens cover a much bigger area, so stopping pesticides at home will make a huge difference to our own health and our city's wildlife.

To have your say, complete the online questionnaire on pesticides and urban nature at <https://forms.office.com/e/PNi9XjAbzn>

For more information visit www.pesticidefreecambridge.org or <https://twitter.com/PANUKPFC>

When going pesticide-free, share a photo from your garden with the hashtag **#PesticideFreeGardening**

Help for energy bills this winter



For a wide range of help, visit www.cambridge.gov.uk/energy-bill-help

Emergency energy vouchers

If struggling on a pre-pay meter, contact PECT. They can give support, free items or vouchers. Email warmhomes@pect.org.uk, phone 01733-568408 or fill in their form at www.pect.org.uk/projects/warmhomes

Warm Home Discount - £150

Households on certain means-tested benefits with high energy use may be eligible for £150 from their energy supplier, taken off their electricity bill this winter. The government will decide who is eligible and notify them by post. Those on Pension Credit should receive this discount automatically.

Energy Bills Support Scheme - £500

Spread across winter 2023/24, eligible households should receive a monthly discount on their energy bills, credited directly to their account or prepay meter. See www.gov.uk/guidance/energy-bills-discount-scheme

Priority Services Register

All energy and gas companies have a priority services register for households in more vulnerable situations. The support available will depend on your supplier and your needs but it offers additional protection - contact your supplier to find out more.

Cold Weather Payment

For those on certain specific benefits, for very cold weather lasting 7 days or more between November and March. Visit www.gov.uk/cold-weather-payment

Winter Fuel Payment - £200-£600

State pensioners should automatically receive their usual £200 (or £300 if over 80) before December, plus a one-off payment of £300. Visit www.gov.uk/winter-fuel-payment/how-to-claim

Cambridgeshire Home Energy Support Services

If you contact them or get referred to them, a phone call or home visit will be booked in with one of their energy advisors, who will help you with energy issues at home.

Email warmhomes@pect.org.uk, phone 01733-568408 or fill in their form at www.pect.org.uk/projects/warmhomes

Energy supplier grants

Bigger energy suppliers like Eon and British Gas can support households with energy-bill debts (you don't have to be their customer). Ask Citizens' Advice to refer you: phone 0808-278-7808 or visit www.citizensadvice.org.uk/debt-and-money/budgeting/budgeting/get-help-with-bills

Household Support Fund

Financial help with energy bills and food, for those in immediate financial hardship. You can find out about eligibility and apply directly online at www.cambridge.gov.uk/household-support-fund Or email community.resilience@cambridge.gov.uk or phone 01223-457000.

Stay Well Grant – up to £400

For individuals and families facing fuel poverty, and for the homeless to help keep warm. Contact Citizens' Advice (details above) or visit <https://www.cambscf.org.uk/stay-well>

Cambridge Local Assistance Scheme

They support people facing unexpected financial difficulties. For more information visit www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/residents/children-and-families/parenting-and-family-support/cambridgeshire-local-assistance-scheme

You apply for the scheme through Citizens' Advice Bureau: contact them at www.cambridgecab.org.uk or Freephone 0808-278-7808, Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm.

Who to contact for services

Register for your personal Housing Services account at www.cambridge.gov.uk/online-accounts

Domestic Abuse 24-hour Helpline

Tel: Freephone 0808-2000-247

Visit www.nationaldomesticviolencehelpline.org.uk

Make council payments by phone

Tel: 01223-457000, with bank card

Homelessness & temporary accommodation, outside office hours

Tel: 03300-538-109 (same cost as a normal landline)

Rents, tenancies, lettings, renting a council garage

Tel: 01223-457000

Visit www.cambridge.gov.uk/council-tenants

Repairs

Tel: 01223-457000; or 0300-303-8389 for out of hours emergency repairs

Contact Council in Sign Language

Register at <https://signlive.co.uk>, then dial 01223-457000 for a live interpreter

Council Tax

Visit www.cambridge.gov.uk

Tel: 01223-457000

Leasehold services

Visit www.cambridge.gov.uk/leaseholders

E: leasehold.services@cambridge.gov.uk

Tel: 01223-457835

Housing for Older People and Visiting Support Service

E: independent.living@cambridge.gov.uk

Tel: 01223-457000

Home-Link lettings

Visit www.home-link.org.uk

Tel: 01223-457000

Housing & Council Tax Benefits

Visit www.cambridge.gov.uk

Tel: 01223-457000

Bins, recycling, street-cleaning

Visit www.cambridge.gov.uk/bins-recycling-and-rubbish

Tel: 01223-457000

Bulky waste collection

Visit www.cambridge.gov.uk/arrange-a-bulky-waste-collection

Tel: 01223-457000

Report tenancy fraud

E: fightfraud@cambridge.gov.uk

Report anti-social behaviour

E: asbsection@cambridge.gov.uk

Tel: 01223-457000

Noise complaints

E: env.health@cambridge.gov.uk

Tel: 01223-457000

Council emergencies out of hours

Tel: 0300-303-8389

To complain about council services

Visit www.cambridge.gov.uk/compliments-complaints-and-suggestions

Council's contractors on estates

TSG Services

E: enquiries@tsgplc.co.uk

Tel: 01223-828777

For gas or hot water, tel. 0800-111-4044

Foster Property Maintenance

E: info@fpm-ltd.co.uk

Tel: 01945-586999

Goshen communal cleaning

E: cs@goshenmultiservices.com

Tel: 0754-2826553

Hi-Spec window cleaning

E: helpdesk@hispecservices.co.uk

Suicide Awareness



If you or someone else feels suicidal, dial 111, then option 2, for help from NHS mental health professionals.

And www.stayingsafe.net is a free website offering practical help for people with suicidal thoughts, and for those caring for them.