

HOME FRONT



Kerry Petts of Folkestone & Hythe Council won innovator of the year in 2022

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Your time to shine in Excellence Awards

The search is on for the stars of the housing sector in Kent and Medway with the opening of nominations for the Kent Housing Group Excellence Awards 2023.

The annual awards – the Oscars for our regional housing sector – celebrate the very best projects, professionals and partnerships across housing in the county.

With 12 categories, there's a real opportunity to showcase the work you do, to shine a light on the places you have created, the projects that make a real

difference and the people without whom it would not happen. Award nominations close on 19 May and don't forget, only KHG members can nominate. The award category descriptions and nomination forms are available on the KHG website.

The **winners** will be announced at a face-to-face awards ceremony in the autumn – look out for more

details in the next edition of Home Front. KHG is grateful to the organisations who sponsored the 2022 awards and we are busy talking to potential sponsors for the 2023 awards. If you are interested in sponsoring an Excellence Award category please email:

helen.miller@ashford.gov.uk

Turn to p2

YOUR TIME TO SHINE IN EXCELLENCE AWARDS



Brian Horton, Interim Chair for KHG said: "These awards are always special. Over the years the judging panel has been inspired by the professionalism, passion and purpose behind the vital contributions colleagues in housing are making in Kent. The ideas, the innovation and the vision that are demonstrated illustrate the caring side of housing and the drive we have to make a difference."

HOW TO NOMINATE

Please visit **Kent Housing Group Excellence Award 2023 – Kent Housing Group** where you can access the categories and nomination form.

The 12 categories are:

- 🏠 asset management
- 🏠 community project
- 🏠 delivering service for vulnerable people
- 🏠 development and regeneration
- 🏠 health or social care professional
- 🏠 housing professional
- 🏠 innovation
- 🏠 partnership
- 🏠 private sector housing
- 🏠 team of the year
- 🏠 unsung community hero / neighbour of the year
- 🏠 young professional

So don't delay, get your nominations in today!

NEWS



LET'S STAY FIRE SAFE

Final preparations are underway to launch a fire safety campaign this spring. Entitled Let's Stay Fire Safe, it is being organised by our Tenancy management sub group.

Chair Vitra Cummins and Vice Chair Julie Terry have been working with ABC Communications on a campaign which includes two animations – one covering fire safety advice in the home and one about not blocking communal areas to store personal items, propping open fire doors, daisy chaining power sockets etc).

A toolkit will be produced containing images, posters using QR codes, social media assets and posts, copy suitable for website, e-newsletters and briefings. We are liaising with Kent Fire & Rescue Service on creating the campaign and they are being consulted on content.

VISIT OUR WEBSITE FOR MORE NEWS: kenthousinggroup.org.uk/news

NEWS

SCHEME FOR SURVIVORS OF DOMESTIC ABUSE

A project group representing several social landlords across Kent have been working together to create a domestic abuse reciprocal scheme tailored to the needs of Kent and Medway.



Housing providers play a pivotal role in keeping their tenants safe from domestic abuse and we know that housing is often a barrier to fleeing abuse and this scheme is aimed to help increase the housing options available to them. It is believed that there are only two other similar formal schemes in the UK, in London and Cambridgeshire.

The multi-agency initiative is being led by Lisa Clarke of Clarion Housing, who said: "The aim is to reduce the risk of homelessness for survivors and the scheme will help landlords move survivors in another local authority area where they may have limited supply. The survivor will rest assured that they would not lose their social tenancy.

"This scheme fits within KCC's Domestic Abuse strategy to help survivor accessing help to end the abuse, ensuring that there is a flexible approach to housing solutions as well as access to services for all."

KHG is writing to all housing associations and heads of housing services in local authorities with stock to brief them about this scheme and inviting them to an event to examine the initiative in detail, in the hope that as many as possible will agree to sign up.

WAR ON TENANCY FRAUD

A campaign in April to clamp down on tenancy fraud in Kent highlights the different types of housing fraud that can be committed and what the penalties for this criminal offence are.

Adam Simmonds, Chair of the Kent Tenancy Fraud Forum, which is part of KHG, said: "Tenancy fraud occurs when a local authority or housing association home is occupied by someone who is either not legally entitled to be there, has obtained use of the property fraudulently or leaves the property empty while living elsewhere. Penalties include a jail term of up to two years and fines of up to £50,000."

The courts also have the power to make the tenant pay back any profits made from the fraud. This fraud restricts the amount of housing available to those genuinely in need and is a drain on the public purse, since those who are left without a home often have to be housed in costly emergency accommodation.

Welcome to Sharon

The Kent Housing Group has appointed Sharon Irvine (below) as our new Partnership Assistant on a 12 month contract starting on 14 March. She will encourage partnership working to accelerate delivery of the priorities set out in the Kent and Medway Housing Strategy. Another priority is supporting the Events group to plan and deliver training and events that benefit members.



Prevent training

Prevent is one of the elements of the Government's Counter Terrorism Strategy. Kent County Council and Medway Council have the lead role in delivering the strategy across the region.

Jess Harman is Kent and Medway Prevent Co-ordinator and one of her key tasks is to deliver Prevent training to agencies. Jess is urging all KHG partners to ensure that training is up to date and that staff have a clear understanding of their Prevent duty and how to make referrals.

Jess is offering free training to partners – to book your session email prevent@kent.gov.uk

EVENTS IN FOCUS



Fuel Poverty and Journey to Net Zero

More than 50 housing professionals attended this Teams event on 19 January to hear presentations from 10 speakers outlining a range of initiatives designed to tackle fuel poverty and cut carbon emissions in homes across Kent and Medway.

An invaluable insight was provided into the current Sustainable Warmth scheme; Green Doctors, the free and impartial home energy advice service; the recently completed Share the Warmth campaign; fuel vouchers; new improvements to ReferKent which now allows you to track and monitor outcomes; retrofitting homes and also using PAS2035 for safe effective retrofit.

There was a strong focus on the current Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund, which included a "open and honest" case study from Folkestone & Hythe District Council based on its experiences of delivering on an earlier 'wave' of the SHDF.

Other presentations looked at routes to improving non grant funded and grant funded private sector homes, and the Solar Together project, which is about to be rolled out across the county.

Spread over two and a half hours, the event succeeded in giving KHG members a real insight into the comprehensive range of initiatives, funds and services available to help vulnerable residents who are in fuel poverty and desperately need assistance to lower their bills, improve their comfort, health and wellbeing, all while cutting carbon emissions and delivering on net zero targets across Kent and Medway.

Fire safety regulations

A presentation on the introduction of new fire safety regulations attracted nearly 70 members. The Kent Fire & Rescue Service covered what landlords need to do to implement the regulations, which came into force on 23 January.

Suzanna Chisholm, head of building safety at KFRS, explained that the regulations stem from recommendations made at the Grenfell inquiry and relate to information provided to tenants and the fire service about buildings.

She covered the requirements for those up to six storeys and those for seven storeys or more which include external wall systems, building and floor plans and firefighting facilities – all to be contained in a secure 'information box' to be installed in an easily accessible location in each tall building.



Autism: exploding the myths

Presenter Mitch Mitchell had his audience of nearly 70 KHG members enthralled as he exploded a series of myths about people living with autism at a Teams event on 24 January.

And if the success of an event can be gauged by the depth and quality of the question and answer session at the end, then Mitch, from specialist employment service Autism Awareness, ensured that the audience were fully engaged with his presentation. Working with Kent County Council on referrals, he said that 50% of the people they supported in getting into and retaining work are autistic.

Addressing fact and fiction, Mitch revealed that autism is more common in boys – for every one girl diagnosed with autism there are four boys in the same situation. Not all autistic people are geniuses – "don't think that the Dustin Hoffman character in the Hollywood movie Rainman, who is a maths genius, is typical," said Mitch.

He debunked the myth that the MMR vaccine causes autism ("no medical evidence"), confirmed that autistic people don't easily understand other people's thoughts and feelings, and rejected claims that autistic people always prefer being alone. "They like to make friends but have more difficulty in doing so," he told his audience.

Outlining common social communication issues experienced by people with autism, he said they have difficulty with sarcasm and tone of voice, take things literally, struggle to maintain eye contact, can't easily read someone's body language and have a tendency to repeat what other people say.

Mitch gave advice on how housing professionals should deal with tenants who have autism – this ranged from giving plenty of notice of a meeting and providing questions in advance, to avoiding ambiguous language and punctuality for appointments – "don't be late!" he warned.

Since his job involves helping employers to make it easier for autistic people to get a job – as well as assisting people with autism to find employment, Mitch ended his presentation with a strong defence of why employees with autism can be a valuable addition to any company.

"They have terrific workplace attributes – they have strong memory skills, logical reasoning skills, maths/IT/music skills, they are honest, punctual and loyal, they are independent thinkers, can really focus on detail and are non-judgemental listeners. Put them in the right roles and they can be a real asset to your business."



Above: Mitch Mitchell

Coming soon...

The Events sub group meeting on 20 February discussed a number of events which are planned for the coming year. These include the Excellence Awards presentation in the autumn (to be held face to face), an event on tackling dampness and mould, exempt accommodation, introduction to the domestic abuse reciprocal agreement for social landlords and a further event with Kent Fire & Rescue Service on fire safety in purpose built blocks – this last one is in response to a request on an evaluation form after a January event, underlining that KHG does follow up on member feedback!

Finally a shout out for more members – with a heavy workload, the Events sub group is always looking for more members to join and help plan and deliver an exciting range of member events in 2023. And if you fancy assisting the Chair by taking up the role of Vice Chair then please don't hesitate to get in touch – email helen.miller@ashford.gov.uk

MEMBERSHIPS

POWER OF PARTNERSHIP

As we embark on the KHG membership renewal process for the year ahead, it's worth recapping on the tremendous range of benefits that partners and their staff can tap into...

Membership of the Group provides organisations with the opportunity to network across a range of partnership organisations, gain strategic and operational knowledge and insight across a broad housing spectrum, and shape and influence key national and local policy decisions and documents.

Highlights over the last year include the successful delivery of our full membership meetings via Teams. These meetings have been very well attended and have allowed a range of topics to be covered, and supported excellent partnership working.

This has included greater joint working with the Kent Housing and Development Group, Kent Chief Planning Officer Group, Kent County Council including commissioners, enabling housing professionals to increase their understanding of services and improve customer journeys. Presentations from Home England have helped members remain abreast of opportunities, providing an invaluable conduit to SELEP and central government

In the last 12 months we collaborated with partners to provide events on domestic abuse, levelling up, support to apply for the Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund, fire safety, autism and fuel poverty. We aim to provide events or training free to our membership organisations. We continue to survey members to ensure that we provide events in the ways, and on the topics, wanted.

Sub groups in focus

Our sub groups provide forums for sharing good practice and ideas. The Asset Management sub group focuses on fire and building safety, dampness and mould, repairs and the journey to net zero in social housing. The Housing, Health and Social Care sub group brings these professionals together to promote healthy places, communities and individuals.

The Engagement sub group focuses on tenant participation, resident engagement and delivering the social housing White Paper. The Tenancy Management sub group discusses housing management service delivery. The Private Sector Housing sub group shares best practice on private sector housing with input from landlord associations.

The Housing Options sub group shares best practice on homelessness, housing options, allocations, lettings and service delivery. The Housing Strategy and Enabling sub group focuses on delivering high quality affordable housing, while a new Strategic Domestic Retrofit sub group looks at improving thermal efficiency in existing privately rented and owned homes.

More information is on our website – contact Helen Miller if you'd like to send a representative to a sub group your organisation does not attend.



We're putting more focus on communications with our members, stakeholders and the media and we recently introduced this quarterly e-newsletter Home Front. Our survey in December 2022 found that members valued the opportunities to learn from peers, joint working, the events, meetings and sub groups. It suggested more work with Public Health and we are strengthening our joint working with Kent Public Health and the new Kent and Medway Integrated Care Partnership.

All this is possible due to your continued support, so thank you again. We look forward to working with you and your colleagues throughout 2023-24. If you have any questions about membership email helen.miller@ashford.gov.uk

Note that membership renewal letters have been issued from our new KentHousingGroup@ashford.gov.uk address, which we will use for some functions moving forward.

Membership benefits

- ✔ Four full membership meetings over the year
- ✔ An invitation to all our events
- ✔ Access to strategic and operational sub group meetings
- ✔ Associated membership with the Housing Forum, including access to their forums and meetings
- ✔ Associated membership with the Housing Diversity Network
- ✔ KHG Excellence Awards 2023 – being held in person this year

SURVEYS

AND OUR SURVEY SAID...

Thank you to everyone who took the time to respond to two surveys we carried out in December – one to main Group members and the other to all members of the sub groups.

The results of the short anonymous online surveys have been collated and have given us plenty of food for thought about the work carried out by KHG, what we do well and what you value the most. The surveys also shine a light on suggestions for things we could do better.

90% of respondents said we provide value for money

There are 55 members in the main KHG and we received 10 responses to the questions: do you feel the Group gives you value for money; what do we do that you value; what could we do better; and how important is delivering the Kent & Medway Housing Strategy to you?

Encouragingly nine of the 10 said KHG does provide value for money. Respondents valued opportunities to talk and learn from their peers, joint working opportunities were praised, while

one member said the Group acts as an advocate for equity and good health and wellbeing.

Training and events were hailed as "excellent", while one summed up by saying "co-ordinate local housing providers across all tenures, campaign for housing, share best practice and be a recognised leader".

Asked what could we do better, it was suggested more work with Public Health (we are strengthening our joint working with Kent Public Health and the new Kent and Medway Integrated Care Partnership). More focus on RP issues was also suggested.

The Kent & Medway Housing Strategy was considered somewhat or extremely important by eight of the 10 respondents.

Sub groups have their say

We have nearly 300 members in the sub groups and 55



responded. Membership of sub groups range from 10 in Events to 43 in Housing, Health and Social Care, with 73 in the full Kent Housing Options group. The survey showed that 10 respondents belong to more than one sub group.

The members of sub groups were asked how useful is the work of each group, how well connected did they feel to KHG, how important is delivering the Kent & Medway Housing Strategy to you, and what can KHG do better.

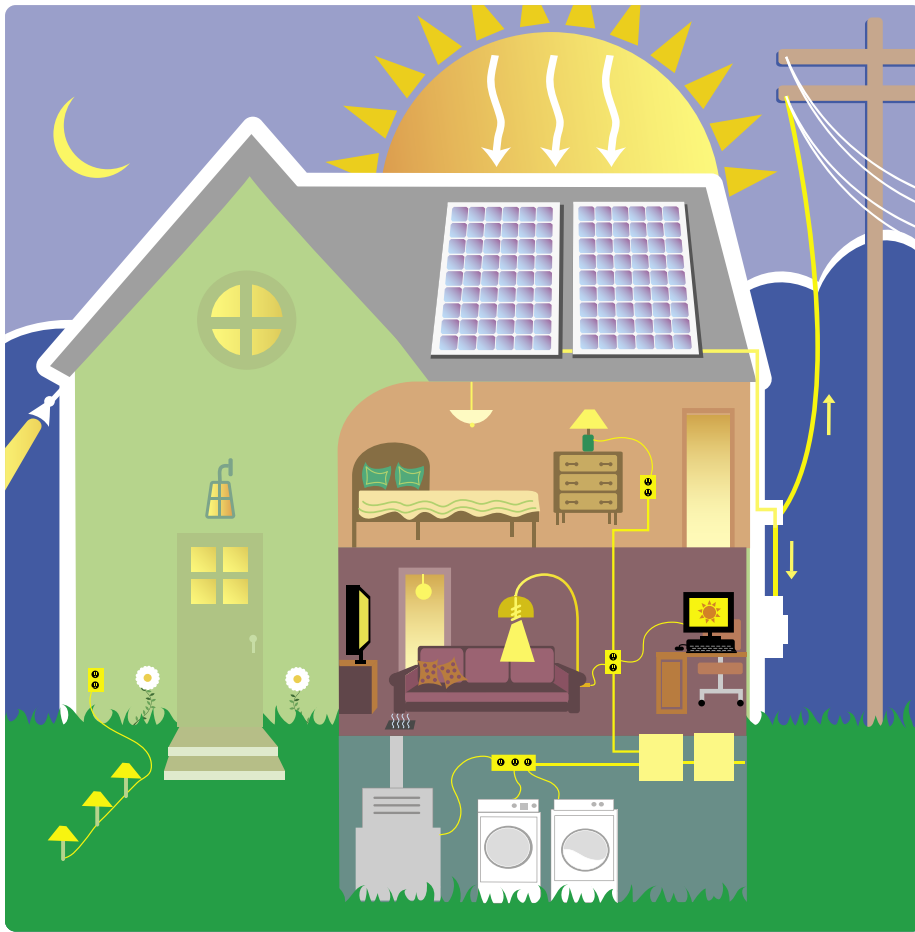
The majority of respondents (49) rated their sub groups somewhat or extremely useful. As to be expected, there was a wide range of answers to how well connected respondents felt – some felt very well connected while a small number less so. Some said that some messages and newsletters do not filter well through member organisations.

We were encouraged to receive a huge number of constructive comments about what we can do better, these included: continue to build on collaborative working; broaden member engagement across the work of KHG; more awareness of other sub groups work/better communication.



NEWS FROM THE SUB GROUPS

Here is a brief summary of the work being undertaken by the hard-working members of our sub groups.



Engagement

Tenant Satisfaction Measures and 'tenant profiling' were discussed in relation to how helpful ONS data might be in enhancing knowledge of demographics and our understanding of the indices of deprivation. A member suggested that a review on the 'silent voice' being conducted by a scrutiny panel might be of interest and it was agreed to review this when completed.

Carrie Hartwell from KCC serious organised crime unit delivered a presentation on how communication between housing providers, police and KCC is key to combating SOC, and she shared case studies to show

the benefits of communication. Folkestone & Hythe's Strategic Tenants Advisory Panel has been formed after consultation with TPAS and a presentation will be made soon.

Tenancy Management

WKHA explained how they'd worked with their tenants to inform their way of addressing domestic abuse, while details were outlined of a spring fire safety campaign in partnership with Kent Fire & Rescue Service and the ABC Communications team. There were round table discussions on the 'professional curiosity' approach to damp and mould and also Tenancy Fraud Week.

Private Sector

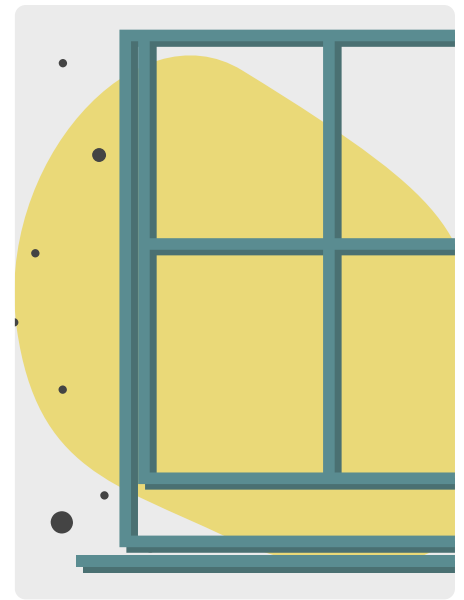
Members heard that all LAs now provide a Hospital Discharge Scheme, with the majority provided through the HIA. Maidstone and Swale run their own schemes.

Councils are working in partnership on Solar Together – the group buying scheme for solar panels and battery storage. Plans are well advanced for the next phase to be launched in the spring.

The group heard that a Government review of guidance on health effects of damp and mould will publish its results soon, while an update was provided about ongoing efforts to develop ever-closer partnerships with KFRS. The Sustainable Warmth funding programme ends in March and the final outcomes of the scheme – including number of measures installed – is awaited.

Kent Homechoice Operational

A comprehensive update on the new Kent Homechoice system was provided, covering testing of the new online application form and pre-assessment, the



readiness of the new website and ongoing communications with all partners and the public. All training and configuration dates – including the Train the Trainer for each council – have been booked.

Strategic Domestic Retrofit

An update of the Kent Fuel Poverty strategy was discussed, with key actions agreed. Regarding retrofitting existing homes, it was agreed to commit to being 'bid ready' to pitch for grants and other funding opportunities, however the resourcing of this remains an issue, members heard. The group vowed to raise its profile, to learn from members' experiences and drive the process across the county.

Asset Management

A presentation from Clarion on the retrofit of properties in Tonbridge looked at how delivery took place, the use of the Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund, procurement routes and opportunities.

There was a debate about the new Strategic Domestic Retrofit group for KHG, how it will look at data modelling, building the installer market and providing trusted advice and support.

There was a presentation on PAS2035 to ensure homes are retrofitted correctly to the right standard, while a product was showcased that reduces heating costs and removes window condensation. The product is not for profit and recyclable and the group is investigating buying at a discounted rate. There was also a discussion on damp and mould, including sharing best practices.



Housing, Health & Social Care

A presentation on Home Straight, a service to help people who hoard, created lively debate covering when a safeguarding referral should be made and the rise in mental health issues leading to more hoarding. The HHSC Action Plan concludes in March 2023 and the new plan extending to 2025 will be discussed at the next meeting.

Below: Ashford's Henwood TA scheme



Housing Strategy & Enabling

A full agenda included an agreement to arrange an event with HSEG, planners and developers to ensure closer working, to address concerns with the process. There was a presentation about supported housing provision – present was KCC's Anya Harris to discuss delivery of supported housing in Kent. A really engaging session, with some LAs keen to understand more about the options for delivering small S106 parcels.

Modern Methods of Construction (off-site construction) for new homes was a hot topic, and there is a strong demand to learn from the experiences of Thanet and Ashford. Group member Liz Crockford, Housing Enabling Officer at Sevenoaks Council, has worked extremely hard with partners and colleagues to garner support and approval for a new rural housing enabling service, Rural and Community Enabling (RACE), which has been commissioned by KHG and will be hosted by Ashford Borough Council. The service is likely to commence on the 1 May 2023.

JOBS CORNER

Are you looking for your next big move within the housing sector in Kent and Medway?

Check out the Jobs page on our website – in recent weeks we have carried vacancies for an Allocations Officer, an Income Recovery Officer, a Housing Scheme Assistant and a Hospital Care Navigator.

Current vacancies include an Assistant Director of Asset Management, Rehousing and Decants Officer, a Senior Project Manager – Tower Blocks, Garages Co-ordinator and a Sales & Marketing adviser.

Visit the jobs page at our website today. Can't see anything that is right for you? Then just sign up for Job Alerts and we will keep you posted on the hottest vacancies as they become available.



WE ARE HIRING!

FREE TO ADVERTISE

We pride ourselves on providing our member organisations and partnership organisations with the opportunity to share details about job vacancies. Advertising as a member of either group or a partnership organisation is **FREE**.

To find out more contact sharon.irvine@ashford.gov.uk

Don't delay, visit our jobs page today at [Jobs at Kent Housing Group](#)

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CONTACT KHG

INTERIM CHAIR OF KENT HOUSING GROUP

Brian Horton
07970 141718
brian@hortonstrategic.com

VICE CHAIR OF KHG

John Littlemore
john.littlemore@maidstone.gov.uk

KHG PARTNERSHIP MANAGER

Helen Miller
helen.miller@ashford.gov.uk

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