

InTouch

Issue 56 Autumn 2023

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Welcome to the autumn edition of InTouch.

I would like to take this opportunity to welcome Jonathan Cowie, our new Chief Executive, who joined PCH last month, taking over from John Clark who has now started his retirement.

We introduce Jonathan in the main feature of this edition, and share his answers to some pressing questions asked by you, our residents. If there are further questions that you would like to ask Jonathan, please do get in touch, and I know he's looking forward to meeting residents in the community over the coming months.

As the weather starts to get colder, we share some simple steps to help you get winter ready, including tips on how to prevent condensation from building up in your home, and information about how we can help if you need to report issues with damp.

We also introduce the manager of our new specialist damp and disrepair department which has been created as part of our zero tolerance approach to damp and mould, and our ongoing commitment to delivering a more proactive approach to managing reports of damp in our homes.

In this edition of InTouch, we showcase the second, colourful new mural that can be found at Morley Court in the city centre. Art like this is so important to help brighten up and enliven our community spaces, and it's great to see how well-received the new murals have been in Plymouth.

There are plenty of stories about how our residents have created blooming community gardens across the city, including at a sheltered housing scheme in Estover, and at Wingfield Road in Stoke. I'm also very impressed by the efforts of three PCH residents, Keith, Thomas and Cara, who have worked hard to make their gardens flourish over the summer months.

There's information about the exciting plans to build a new community in Southway, delivering 125 new affordable homes in the north of the city.

And finally, I would also like to extend a warm welcome to our new Board Members, Emma Lovett and Peter Nourse. Emma is qualified accountant who brings 30 years' experience of systems implementation, and business transformation to PCH. Peter is an experienced housing professional and leader, and has served on Housing Association and ALMO Boards for over 15 years, and as Chair of the Quality of Existing Homes Group for the National Federation of Housing.



Valerie

**Valerie Lee,
Chair of the Board**



Residents in Estover create new community garden

Residents living at a PCH Housing with Support scheme in Estover have come together to start a community garden where they can grow an abundance of fruit and vegetables all year round.

In the new planters outside the community room, sprouting vegetables have been growing, and the residents have been able to plant seeds that can flourish in their specific garden environment with the help of Tess Willmot, a permaculture designer and edible landscape specialist.

All residents living in the 33 flat scheme at have been invited to get involved with the project, with many contributing physically and others making a monetary donation to aid the planting.

Jenette Austin, Francis and Gill who are the keen gardening residents living at the scheme are delighted with the introduction of their new planter, pots of flowers and fruit trees, and they love getting involved where they can.

Jenette said: "Before we started our new community garden I had never planted a single thing in my life, but I am really happy that as a scheme we are pulling together and planting such a variety of fruit, vegetables and even flowers.

"So many residents have contributed in different ways, and it is a real team effort. Once the goods are grown, the residents can help themselves and there is no fee if they want to take any items.

"I don't like hearing when my fellow residents say that they can't have anything because they haven't helped. It really doesn't work like that; everything is communal, and they can just help themselves.

"This is the start of a new beginning and I love that it is bringing everyone together. Without the support of our PCH Housing with Support officers we wouldn't have got to where we are now."

Tess Willmot was invited to support the scheme by the scheme's Housing with Support Officer, Karen Stone, who identified there was an appetite for extra knowledge on planting and gardening, and Tess's support has been greatly appreciated by all the residents involved.

Tess said: "I have been really impressed with what the residents have achieved. They are a lovely group and they really wanted to get this project started.

"The way that they have involved other residents who didn't want to garden themselves has been excellent. They have invited residents to enjoy it in different ways, with some buying plants and others contributing physically.

"At Leypark Court they have quite a challenge as it is rather shady and there are a lot of deer, but the residents are keen to engage and find creative ways to plant fruit and vegetables.

"I have been able to provide light touch support when they need it, sharing what I know and helping them find solutions to some of the challenges they have, and I wish them every success as their food continues to grow."

Karen Stone, Housing with Support Officer at PCH, said: "Tess has been invaluable in her support. It is lovely to see all the residents socialising together and growing such an incredible range of fruit and vegetables."



Get winter ready: Dealing with damp and mould

Damp and mould can be bad for your health – and we are committed to doing all we can to tackling it in our properties.

Damp and mould can make your home less pleasant to live in as well as being potentially dangerous to breathe in, but sometimes it can be difficult to pin down the cause.

If there is damp in your home which needs investigating, our teams will visit to investigate – and to treat mould – and we are putting new, robust measures in place to improve how we respond to reports of damp and mould, and how quickly we take action when it's needed.

Sometimes the cause of mould can be condensation, and this often builds up in modern, well-insulated homes. Condensation is simply moisture in your home which hasn't been able to escape – and moisture can be created through cooking, drying clothes, showering and even breathing.

As the weather starts getting colder in the months ahead, here are some simple steps to help prevent condensation from building up at home.

It's all about airflow

One thing to keep in mind when preventing condensation is air flow.

Ensuring there is space for air to move will help prevent condensation from building up.

This goes for just about everything from ensuring there are gaps between furniture and the walls, to cleaning the inside of cupboards and drawers if they are too full.

Some guidelines which can help include:



Open windows for a while each day, or use trickle vents



Keep air vents free from obstructions



Leave a small gap between furniture and walls so air can circulate



Maintain a low heat in your home when it's cold or wet

Cooking



Use a lid if boiling things in a pan – this will save energy, speed up the cooking process and stop steam from escaping



Whether you are roasting, frying, or boiling, this will generate steam. Use the extractor fan or open a window briefly to allow steam to escape

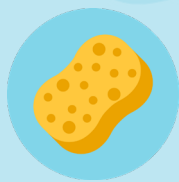
Washing



Dry clothes outside where possible



If drying clothes indoors, try to leave a window slightly open



Open a window briefly after doing the dishes



Shut the bathroom door when having a shower or bath



Make sure extractor fans are on and working

Sometimes damp can be caused by external factors such as guttering or roofing.

If you have concerns about damp or mould, or think that a persistent issue may be caused from water outside leaking into your home, please contact your Housing Officer or call our Contact Centre so an appointment can be made for a visit from one of our specialist damp officers.

For further information and advice about ways to help prevent condensation and mould, visit our website at www.plymouthcommunityhomes.co.uk where we have a special information section.

This includes an animated video, a damp and mould advice leaflet, and a link to our new Damp & Condensation Policy, which sets out PCH's approach to dealing with these issues, and what residents can expect from us.

Sean heads up new team to tackle damp and disrepair

Sean Watson has been appointed as our new Damp and Disrepair Manager to manage a team specialising in dealing with cases of damp, mould and disrepair.

PCH has been working hard to improve how we manage damp and mould in our homes and we've followed guidance from the Housing Ombudsman, which published a report in October 2021 urging a change in culture by landlords to improve experiences for residents.

We've already created a new Damp and Condensation Policy to set out what residents can expect from us, shared a user-friendly animated video guide explaining how we can help with damp problems and sharing tips for how to reduce condensation, and made wholesale changes to our reporting process and timeframe for damp inspections.

The next step is the creation of a new, specialist department focused on managing cases and improving our response, and the appointment of Sean and his team shows our ongoing commitment to a zero-tolerance and proactive approach to responding to incidents of damp and mould in residents' homes.

Sean will oversee two new Repairs Supervisors who will specialise in damp inspections, as well as head up our internal Damp Project Group, which is a team of staff from across the organisation who continue to monitor our progress against the Housing Ombudsman's 26 recommendations for housing providers.

Sean, who stepped into the role in August said: "I'm pleased to have the opportunity to make a real difference to the everyday lives of our residents through this new role.

"My focus will be on continuously educating staff and residents on damp and mould and what we can do to combat it. As an organisation, PCH is taking damp and mould seriously and doing the right thing by taking a proactive approach to get ahead of problems before they arise."





The Beacon Summer Event: A Hub of Excitement

Plymouth Community Homes recently hosted an engaging community event at The Beacon, uniting residents and families for a day filled with happiness and joy.

The event was highly successful, drawing a significant turnout that highlighted the strength within our community.

The event featured a range of activities, for all to enjoy. From face painting and mini golf to bouncy castles, savoury burgers and hotdogs grilling on-site, there was something enjoyable for everyone. The atmosphere buzzed with excitement as the children explored.

An arts and crafts table provided a creative outlet for all ages. People expressed themselves through various artistic endeavours. Among the highlights of the day were free toy giveaways that left children brimming with happiness. These gifts not only spread joy but also emphasized the role of our PCH Reuse Centre in finding new homes for neglected toys.

Leigh Ferguson, Communities Worker at Plymouth Community Homes, said: “The strong turnout at The Beacon reflects the vitality of our local community and the importance of coming together in positive ways.”

Plymouth Community Homes extend heartfelt thanks to all attendees and acknowledge the generous contributions from Mitie, Kendall Kingscott Ltd, Ian Williams, Bell UK, and The Durnford Society Ltd. These contributions greatly contributed to the event’s success.

Stay informed about upcoming events and initiatives from Plymouth Community Homes. We look forward to seeing you all again soon.g such an incredible range of fruit and vegetables.”



Briarwood Heights Summer Programme



Leigh Ferguson, Communities Worker at Plymouth Community Homes, said: "It's been lovely to meet the residents of Briarwood Heights since it opened last year. There seems to be a real appetite from residents to help keep the block looking nice and the work we carried out in planting pots for the patio area forms part of that."

"We hosted a delightful gardening session supported by the talented gardener, Hazel Wooding. Nine enthusiastic residents joined in, showing they have green thumbs and planting vibrant flowers in two communal planters. We hope that this colourful addition will inspire everyone in the block to make the most of our shared patio and garden space."

During the summer months we hosted a programme at the Briarwood Heights block in North Prospect, with residents joining in and raising some community spirit.

From craft sessions to fun-filled games, we've been hosting a variety of activities for residents to enjoy. It's been great to witness the creativity and laughter filling the air as residents come together and help improve the area they live in.

Rob, a Briarwood resident, said: "It was good as residents to be able to get together in a safe space to do something we all enjoy."

Pam, another Briarwood resident, added: "Everyone really enjoyed the activity. The plants look great. We planted strawberries and lettuces too, so we are looking forward to enjoying some of the produce when it grows too."

125 new affordable homes planned for Plymouth

Plymouth Community Homes will be able to build 125 much-needed new affordable homes in Plymouth after securing a large site in the north of the city.

A new community will be created on land in Southway which has previously housed a paper-converting mill. The land, located between Clittaford Road and Southway Drive, has been purchased by PCH from Countryside Partnerships Ltd for £3,150,000.

The development should deliver a mix of 1 & 2 bedroom apartments, and 2, 3 & 4 bedroom homes. Of these, 74 properties will be made available for social rent for local people in housing need, and 49 homes will be offered for shared ownership purchase through the organisation's sales brand SO Living.

The new homes will be built with high levels of insulation and energy efficiency which will result in lower running costs and reduced energy bills for residents, and the scheme also plans to include accessible and wheelchair standard homes.

PCH is investing in the project which will cost over £28m, with plans to seek funding support from Homes England for the building of the new affordable homes.

Nick Jackson, Director of Business Services and Development at Plymouth Community Homes, said: "Southway is a really popular area for families, with excellent links to the centre of Plymouth as well as a number of good local schools, and our plans for this site include some large 3 and 4 bedroom houses which will help provide long-term security for local families in housing need."



City Centre Shop Closed



The PCH City Centre Shop has now closed to customers as more residents were choosing to get in touch with us online, or to visit staff at one of our many community drop-in sessions.

Plymouth Community Homes has maintained a shop within the city centre since 2012 so residents could drop in to speak to staff when they were in town, and without having to visit to our head office.

But as we've increased the ways for people to get in touch with us and shopping patterns have changed, fewer people have been visiting the city centre shop – and when it reopened after the Covid lockdowns, footfall was very low and only averaged around 25 people a week.

Liz Phillips, Head of Income, Commercial and Home Ownership at PCH, said: "We've seen increasing numbers of residents preferring to contact us via the website, the resident portal, email, social media or by calling our Contact Centre.

"We've also expanded our community drop-in sessions held across the city, and these prove more popular for residents as it means they can meet with a Housing Officer face-to-face on their doorstep, rather than having to journey into town."

PCH operates a proactive community presence across the city, working in partnership with local community centres, libraries and groups, Plymouth City Council and Devon & Cornwall Police to host regular surgery-type drop in sessions, as well as hosting weekly drop-in sessions at The Beacon Community Centre in North Prospect, the Mount Wise Towers and Marlborough House.

Housing Officers and Assistant Housing Officers attend drop-in sessions and surgeries so residents can speak to them directly about any issues.



There are lots of ways customers can get in touch with us – and we welcome feedback, comments and queries:



PCH website

www.plymouthcommunityhomes.co.uk
You can fill in an online enquiry form, make a complaint or pay a compliment



MyPCH resident portal

mypch.plymouthcommunityhomes.co.uk

PCH tenants can sign up for a MyPCH account where they can pay their rent, check their balance, report a repair, make a complaint, update their contact details or ask for advice.



Social media

Follow us on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram or LinkedIn. You can post a comment or send us a direct message via any of these channels.



Call us

Call our Contact Centre for all general enquiries or repairs on 0808 230 6500

Our payment line for rent or debt payments is 0800 032 7100

Our Anti-social Behaviour out of hours line is 0800 028 7377



Visit us

Our head office is at Plumer House on Tailyour Road in Crownhill, PL6 5DH

Monday - Thursday: 9am to 5pm
Friday: 9am to 4:30pm



Community drop in sessions

Visit the PCH website for details of the regular drop-in sessions held at community venues across Plymouth and the surrounding area.

You can also visit the PCH website for updates on neighbourhood walkabouts or community events
www.plymouthcommunityhomes.co.uk/your-community/get-involved/get-involved-options



Mural brightening up the West End

A huge new mural has appeared on the side of Morley Court in the West End of Plymouth as part of a project to tackle graffiti being led by PCH.

Residents and the local community have welcomed the new artwork in the heart of Plymouth's city centre as a programme to refresh public spaces and help prevent illegal graffiti continues.

The creation was commissioned by Plymouth Community Homes and was designed and painted by Jordan Lauder, AKA SpraySaint in an effort to brighten up city blocks and make the area more colourful and welcoming for PCH residents.

The mural was painted with a nature theme with a large stag and foal, wildlife including butterflies, and colourful

autumnal leaves to appeal to everyone visiting Morley Court - and it has had nothing but positive feedback so far.

The new addition follows another mural completed at the front of Morley Court in June featuring a similar nature scene, which was a huge success and has stopped unwanted graffiti from appearing in the area.

PCH hopes the murals will also increase footfall to the area and bring business to our commercial tenants based locally.

InTouch is going digital

Every three months, we send out InTouch to over 16,000 homes across Plymouth and the surrounding area.

Whilst we love giving our readers the chance to stay up to date with the latest news, special features and information on our services, we also want to do our bit for the environment and reduce the amount of paper we print. And we know that some readers prefer to receive communications online, so we want to give you the option of hearing from us digitally.



If you would like to keep receiving a paper copy of InTouch and opt-out of receiving your copy of InTouch digitally please email news@plymouthcommunityhomes.co.uk with your name, address and tenancy number if available.



Read InTouch online

You said, we did: Mutual Exchanges

Every quarter, we look at areas where residents have asked us to improve our services, and what has changed as a result. This time, we're talking about our mutual exchange process.

A mutual exchange is when a resident swaps their home with another social housing resident.

You may need a mutual exchange for a number of reasons – you may need more (or less) space or need to move to be closer to work or family.

Swapping homes can be beneficial for residents as it represents a chance for you to select your new home and secure a move, rather than having to wait for a transfer or bid through Devon HomeChoice.

For PCH, it means that our homes are used to meet increasing housing demand – with families looking for bigger homes, or residents looking to downsize, finding the right home for them.

But the process of organising a swap can be confusing, and we were being asked to make it clearer how to manage a mutual exchange.

You said: The mutual exchange process is difficult to understand, and we don't know the rules. The policy isn't clear for all residents

We Did:

A major consultation was carried out with residents about the process itself, and we also reviewed what our guidance was, as well as the governing restrictions around mutual exchange.

We then created a new policy which sets out what you can expect from PCH when applying for a mutual

exchange, and how to successfully complete a home swap with another social housing resident.

This policy was discussed and reviewed by our Customer Focus Committee, which includes co-opted tenant members, before being accepted and shared to all residents.

You said: The guidelines for a mutual exchange aren't clear and the language is complicated. The information needs to be more user-friendly.

We Did:

We created a new, engaging animated video which sets out the steps you need to take in order to make a mutual exchange happen. This was uploaded to our website and promoted via the PCH social media channels.

An accompanying leaflet with similarly clear, easy to understand graphics was also created to walk you through the process.

Copies were provided at our key community bases, and offered to residents when they got in touch and asked about mutual exchange.

If you have any questions about mutual exchange, or want some help guiding you through the process, our housing staff are on hand to help you with everything from getting online, creating your advert and searching for a home to swap.

To find out more and view our brand new policy, animation and up-to-date information, – visit our Mutual Exchange page on our website and you'll find everything you need in one place.

PCH in Bloom

In our last edition of InTouch, we asked you to send us your photos of flowers and your garden to share in this edition, to show residents your fabulous gardening efforts.

We are pleased to show you the efforts of three PCH residents, including Keith from Egguckland, Thomas in Plympton and Cara in Barne Barton who have worked hard to make their gardens flourish over the summer months.

We had the pleasure of meeting resident Keith Davey, who tends to a colourful garden that has become a true delight in his community.

Keith, an experienced gardener of twenty years, finds joy in cultivating his garden: "Gardening has been my passion for two decades," Keith shared. "It's a great way to stay occupied, especially now that I'm retired. I take pride in my garden."

His garden isn't just a personal space; it's a gift to the neighbourhood:

"It's great to see people stop and appreciate my work - I must be doing something right"

Keith Davey's garden is proof of the beauty that can flourish through passion and dedication. As we look toward changing seasons, we look forward to catching up with Keith's garden next year.



Thomas in Plympton has attracted Bees to his garden – and doesn't it look amazing!

Cara from Barne Barton has lived in her house for over 40 years, and has transformed her garden into a tranquil space for her family to enjoy.

Cara said: "We were never into gardening up until about six years ago as we used to own horses which took up most of our time.

"We have gradually renovated and transformed the garden, adding different features including plants and trees which were free from garden centres, Facebook Marketplace and from our family and friends. We are so proud of our garden as we have done it on such a tight budget, and we absolutely love it."





Wingfield Road Community Garden

Residents living in Stoke have created their very own community garden, transforming an unused overgrown space into a welcoming area for residents, locals and their families to enjoy.

Now that summer is in full swing, flowers are in bloom and the fruit and vegetables are thriving, residents are taking advantage of the drier and warmer weather to spend more time in the space.

The community garden, located in Wingfield Road is a very active project run solely by volunteers. There are many visitors to the garden who contribute both physically and financially, and enjoy spending time there.

It is run by many members of the local community, including two key individuals and local residents, Andy and Jannet who have lived in the area for a number of years. They have been instrumental in making the garden what it is today, both visiting in their spare time, which has helped them to cope with the struggles they face in their lives.

Janet has sadly experienced tragedy in her life, and is currently living with a terminal cancer diagnosis. Being a part of the Wingfield Road Community Garden has brought her joy, and it helps her to remember her late sons, one of which who visited the garden before his passing.

Janet said: "I have lived in a block at Wingfield Road for over 40 years and I have been involved with the community garden project since it started.

"My son who I sadly lost last year helped to set up the Wingfield Road Community Garden Facebook page and visited the garden when he was able to, so he's always on my mind when we are here.

"Coming to the garden helps me to distract my thoughts, and I really enjoy coming down to the space, growing a selection of fruit and vegetables, as well as seeing the growth of the beautiful flowers.

Andy also benefits hugely from working at the garden, and feels proud and humble to be a part of the local community.

Andy said: "I moved to Wingfield Road 2-3 years ago, and we are lucky to have a nice balcony but sadly no garden, despite the masses of greenspace outside the flats.

"I have always been interested in nature conservation, so getting involved with the project has been exciting for me.

"The land was left empty for a long period of time, with long and overgrown grass and I was determined to make this space into something for the community.

"After making enquiries with my Housing Officer and Ryan Huws, a Communities Worker at PCH, our proposal to turn it into a community garden was accepted.

"The garden is now filled with raised beds, a shed and so much more, and the funding from local ward councillors was helpful in allowing the garden to come to life in a different way.

"After our first meeting and a letter drop from PCH, key individuals got involved, coming along to the open day which was wonderful for the community. We have since gained support from locals passing by who gradually started to show interest in project and now, we have a group of regular members, as well as the opportunity for new members to pop along when the gates are open.

"The community garden has really helped my mental health as spending time there is extremely therapeutic, as well as being good for my self-esteem.

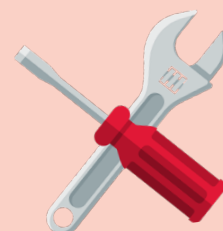
"I take great pride in the project, and I love seeing it taking off. It is great that PCH residents and the local

Maintenance & Repairs: Not going to be in?

We kindly ask that you let us know in advance if you will not be at home when you have a scheduled appointment for a booked repair or maintenance visit, such as a gas boiler service or other check.

Each missed appointment costs PCH £17, and this is money which could be better spent on improving our services for residents.

You can let us know if you won't be able to make an appointment by emailing enquiries@pch.co.uk or calling the Contact Centre on 0808 230 6500.



New board member: Emma Louett

Board Member and member of the Audit and Risk Committee Joined the PCH Board in July 2023

Emma is a qualified accountant and has worked in several different industries including Retail, Housing and most recently global Supply Chain Management, in a career spanning 30 years. She has experience of systems implementation, business transformation, and raising finance.

Originally from Oxfordshire, Emma moved to the South West six years ago after returning from living and working in South America. She is now semi-retired and lives with her partner and three dogs in Cornwall.

“I am excited to have joined Plymouth Community Homes, a highly regarded housing association. My personal experience living in a developing country has increased my awareness and perspective of people living on very low incomes, the challenges that people face on a day-to-day basis, and that even the smallest assistance makes a sizeable difference to people's lives and the community they live in.”



community are enjoying it, as it helps people physically as well as mentally.

“A community project can't work without community, and this is why it is so important.”

Ryan Huws, Communities Worker at PCH, said: “Following a request for help with gardening from local residents, the Wingfield Road Community Garden started in 2019. Since its creation, we have built and allocated raised beds so members can grow what they like.

“We have a mixture of veg, fruit and flowers. We also make the garden environmentally friendly and feed the birds. This year, we felt confident enough to enter the Stoke in Bloom Competition. We all now have our fingers crossed until the results come through!”

Michelle (pictured) became a member of the Wingfield Road Community Garden earlier this year, and was keen to start planting a few things, including carrots. Upon joining she was met with useful tips to help the carrots thrive, which she found really useful.

Members of the Janner Men's Shed also paid a visit to the garden and offered to make different wooden features for the members to enjoy.

The garden has recently received a delivery of top-soil and bark-chips from Travis Perkins which was donated through social value. The donation has benefitted the garden greatly, and they were able to create safe paths with the bark-chips, and top up the raised beds with the soil.

Adam Snell, Branch Manager at Travis Perkins Plymouth, said: “Travis Perkins Plymouth is proud to be able to support the local community through social value projects.”

We are delighted to share that the garden has recently been awarded first place in the Stoke in Bloom competition for 'Best Community Garden'. As well as this, it has also been named a wildlife friendly space by the Devon Wildlife Trust, which is a huge achievement.

South West Residents Design Conference 2023


Wednesday 22 November • In person & online



Join Social Housing staff and residents from across the South West for engaging talks, interactive activities and refreshments.

At Plumer House, Local Housing Offices (TBC), or remote via Microsoft Teams

This year's conference theme is:

 Future homes design and technology



For more information, contact PCH on 0808 230 6500 and ask to speak to the Communities Team or email communitiesteam@plymouthcommunityhomes.co.uk





Void letting standards

New tenants moving into a PCH property which needs upgrading will be given decoration packs to give them more choice in styling their new home.

A pilot scheme has been successfully trialled by Plymouth Community Homes to change the way empty properties, or 'voids', in a poor condition are prepared for reletting to new tenants, to help speed up the process and provide better value for money.

Following positive feedback from tenants, the scheme is being extended and it will be reviewed again in six months' time.

As well as being more cost effective, the package of measures is designed to offer more choice for tenants, and also helps to reduce turnaround times so new tenants can move into an affordable home more quickly.

Of the 16,000 homes managed by PCH in Plymouth and the surrounding area, on average around 12 homes a week become vacant and are relet to new tenants.

PCH is working towards meeting a target of reletting any empty homes within 20 days.

The new measures include issuing vouchers for decoration packs if an empty property is in a state of poor decoration, so the new tenants can decorate their homes in their preferred colours and styles rather than PCH teams carrying out those works in advance. The packs will include items such as paint, filler, brushes and sandpaper, and tenants can select colours from a paint colour chart.

Neil Thompson, Voids Manager at PCH, explained: "When an empty property is in a state of poor decoration, we've previously redecorated ourselves before any new tenants move in, but we often find homes are immediately repainted by the new residents, as they want to personalise their new home and make it more to their taste.

"We will now be extending a different approach so if the decoration of a property is poor, instead of our teams painting the home before it can be relet, decoration packs will be given to tenants so they can choose the colour of the rooms for their new home, rather than this being dictated by their landlord.

"Residents who aren't able to carry out any decoration work themselves, or who don't have relatives or friends to help, will still be supported by our teams with any necessary decoration work required."

Not all homes are redecorated before being let to new tenants as some may already be in good condition. Other changes being rolled out include if a repair is not possible to the existing fence, new fencing being ordered in a standard-style in metal or timber, rather than the specially manufactured, ornate metal fencing previously used as standard.

Repairs will be made to paths and outdoor hardstanding areas surrounding homes, rather than these spaces being automatically replaced as standard, which can take much longer to organise.

A repair-first approach will also be trialled for kitchens

and for floors rather than automatic replacement, with the aim of ensuring a more environmentally-friendly approach.

The new void letting standard measures will continue to be fully compliant with current regulatory standards and the Government's HHSRS (Housing Health and Safety Rating System), and should offer PCH a more cost-effective approach to reletting empty homes.

Vulnerable tenants will be supported by managers on a discretionary basis depending on need, and properties within PCH's sheltered schemes, including Housing with Support Schemes and bungalows designated for over 55s, won't be included in the changes.

PCH managers will be tracking satisfaction levels amongst tenants to help assess the impact of the changes.

Teams will report back to PCH's Customer Focus Committee in November to review the results before a final decision is taken on whether to adopt the measures permanently.

Visit our website for more information.

"if the decoration of a property is poor, instead of our teams painting the home before it can be relet, decoration packs will be given to tenants so they can choose the colour of the rooms for their new home"

Q&A with our new Chief Executive

This autumn, Jonathan Cowie joined Plymouth Community Homes as its new Chief Executive, taking over from John Clark after he retired following seven years at the helm. Here we introduce Jonathan, find out some more about his background, interests and focus for PCH, and put some of your questions to him.

Who is the new CEO?

Jonathan Cowie became the new Chief Executive of PCH in September. Jonathan has a long career of working in the housing sector, most recently as Chief Operating Officer at VIVID housing association, as well for telecommunications and customer service companies.

What else can you tell us about Jonathan Cowie?

Jonathan has recently moved to Devon with his wife Lisa, and they are living just outside Plymouth in the South Hams. The couple have two sons, one who works as a supermarket manager and the younger attends university.

In his spare time, Jonathan enjoys watching rugby, walking the South West coast, following F1, and exploring history, which he studied at university.

Jonathan said: "I have always loved history, and I have recently been exploring military history sites across Northern Europe. I'm particularly interested in exploring the role Plymouth has played through the centuries.

"I have also recently taken up car mechanics and restoration since lockdown. YouTube has been my best friend here and I've hugely enjoyed it."

Jonathan is enjoying getting to know the area and its people as well.

He said: "I'm really looking forward to exploring Plymouth more. I have been really enjoying the coastal paths in Devon - and the great pubs - and still lots to explore. I'd welcome any recommendations."

What will the new CEO be focusing on at PCH?

Jonathan said: "I moved to work in social housing because I wanted to make a real difference to peoples' lives as part of their local communities. Housing plays such a crucial role in our health and well-being and our home is the safe place when we close our front doors. What I love most about working in social housing is working with residents, colleagues and engaged stakeholders to solve problems together, to help the community thrive. In my view, this is the only way we can ensure we are working on the right priorities.

"Having spent my career working to improve services in both the private sector and housing, I want to ensure we understand what is most important to residents, and ensure this is reflected in our priorities, as these change and evolve. It's very easy for organisations to be focused on what they need to deliver and I want to ensure we keep asking ourselves 'why' to ensure we stay focused on the PCH Vision to provide homes and communities where people want to live.

We asked PCH residents to share their questions for Jonathan, and here are a selection.

Jack from Devonport asked: "Why does it take so long to get a repair booked?"

Jonathan said: "We're sorry if it's taking longer to book repairs; this is certainly not our intention. We're working hard to respond to repairs requests as quickly as we can.

"Over the last 12 months, we completed standard routine repairs within 13 days on average, and we aim

to respond to all emergency repairs within 24 hours. We're working hard to improve turnaround times and making sure we have the right contractors in place so we can respond more quickly."

Sabrina from Barne Barton asked: "Are PCH going to be more relaxed with their approach to keeping pets as at the moment it feels very restricted?"

Jonathan said: "PCH is looking at this right now, having just carried out a resident consultation on the current Pet Policy, asking for feedback about the current arrangements.

"The results of the consultation will help us update the policy and see where we may need to make changes, and a revised Pets Policy will go to our Customer Focus Committee in November for their review."

Laura from Whitleigh asked: **“What are your plans for neighbourhood walkabouts? We hardly ever see a housing officer where we live anymore – are you going to bring back more walkabouts?”**

Jonathan said: “We already carry out neighbourhood walkabouts – and we’re planning to do more. We’ll be sharing more details about walkabouts on the website so you can find out when the next one is taking place.

Personally, I am hugely in favour of walkabouts and want the teams to be out in the community on a walkabout at least once a month, so they experience the neighbourhood as our residents do.”

Shireen from Plymouth asked: **“What are you going to do to help families who need bigger homes? We’ve got eight of us in a small 3-bed flat which is only a five-person property.”**

Jonathan said: “Overcrowding is a direct result of the shortage of affordable homes across the UK as well as Plymouth, and we are committed to building over 1,000 new affordable homes by 2026 to do all we can to help increase supply, including more 3 and 4 bed homes.

“As families grow or circumstances change, we work closely with the local authorities to look at all the options, alongside Devon and Cornwall Home Choice, and with our mutual exchange policy in place. I would be happy to connect you to your local housing officer if that hasn’t already happened to ensure we have explored all options for you.”

Gill from Weston Mill asked: **“Why are we not receiving the service we pay for? We pay for ten grass cuts a year and get half of that; in this cost-of-living crisis we’re paying over the odds, what will you do about it?”**

Jonathan said: “PCH has always aimed to undertake nine grass cuts each year, but these have to be prioritised for health and safety and are dependent on the weather; if it’s too wet, it isn’t safe for a cut to happen, for example.

“But residents are only ever charged for the cuts they receive – if we carry out less due to weather conditions, the service charges are reduced so residents are only charged for the actual grass cuts undertaken.”

Elaine from Plympton asked: **“Do you feel it’s acceptable that PCH has been without a permanent Director of Housing & Neighbourhoods for such a long time? What is putting people off applying for senior positions at PCH, and will you be looking at how many positions are vacant within PCH as this obviously is having an effect on how services are delivered to tenants?”**

Jonathan said: “I totally support the question and I have been working on this issue prior to joining PCH, hoping to ensure we have a permanent Director in post as quickly as possible, as this is such an important role supporting residents. I will also ensure residents on the Customer Focus Committee are involved in the recruitment process.

With over one million job roles vacant across the UK, we are working hard to ensure our offer as an employer is competitive and that we can fill vacancies as quickly as we can. This has been harder for some specific roles recently, however we intend to continue focusing on making sure PCH is an ‘employer of choice’ to help address this.”

Steven from Southway asked: **“Will you be putting rents and service charges up again next year? How will you try to help those residents who are really struggling with the cost-of-living crisis?”**

Jonathan said: “Service charges are based on the actual costs to deliver the service, often through third party suppliers such as energy companies. PCH only passes through these costs. Therefore different service costs may rise or fall depending on the open market. We know energy costs have increased significantly in the last two years and this has had an impact on service charges. But we do all we can to

support tenants who are struggling with increased costs, and the teams help tenants with applications for benefits, advice on Government support they could be entitled to, debt advice, and financial aid in some cases. Anyone concerned about paying their bills should get in touch with our Financial Inclusion Team by calling us on 0800 028 0350.”

Michael from Honicknowle asked: **“Why is there a disparity in rents across the city for all types of properties?”**

Jonathan said: “Residents may pay different rents depending on where they live in Plymouth, or when they took on their lease and how long they have been with us.

“We set our rents based on a Government formula which takes into account the number of bedrooms, size, and amenities like gardens, as well as the open

market value of a home. PCH social rents are some of the lowest in the country, and around 50% less than the cost of renting the same home privately. There is a lot of information on our website which explains more about the different kinds of rents we offer, and how they are calculated.”

Gaynor from Plymouth asked: **“We’ve seen the introduction of working from home in recent years; will the new CEO encourage staff to work from home?”**

Jonathan said: “A large part of our service has to be provided directly in your home and neighbourhood so I expect the local and on-site workforce presence to absolutely continue. I think it is really important that colleagues can make the decision to be at the location that allows them to carry out their job in the most

effective way, in order to deliver a great service to residents. We ask our office-based staff to work from Plumer House for at least two days a week to ensure we can continue to collaborate and work between teams in the most effective way.”

Angela from North Prospect asked: **“What are you going to do about damp and mould? We’ve read about people dying from mould in their social housing flats and it’s very scary.”**

Jonathan said: “We have a zero tolerance approach to damp and mould in your home and are focused on working hard to improve how we respond to reports from residents.”

“There is a new specialist team at PCH who are skilled specifically around dealing with damp and mould, and

if you’re concerned about damp in your home, please get in touch so the team can arrange an inspection. Call us on 0808 230 6500 or message through MyPCH or our website.”

Rent statements are going digital

With residents increasingly asking for more digital services to manage their tenancies, we’re proposing to digitise all of our quarterly rent statements from next year.

A project to digitise our quarterly InTouch newsletter has proved very popular, and 60% of residents are now signed up to our online portal MyPCH to manage their tenancies, pay their rent, check their balance or report a repair.

We are working to do even more for the environment and further reduce our carbon footprint by keeping all quarterly rent statements online as a next step.

MyPCH gives residents the opportunity to view and/or download a statement of their rent account at any time. The MyPCH resident portal is currently being rebuilt with a new, much improved platform being created which will be able to offer residents a wealth of new features and functionality, and this will be launched early next year.

We will always give residents access to our services in the way they want – we provide our services digitally by design, but access will always be by resident choice and we are happy to continue to provide printed statements to those residents who want to receive one.

By consulting on digitising our rent statements, we’re honouring the commitments we have set out in our business plan to know and listen to our customers and decarbonise our business.

You can request a printed rent statement at anytime by phone on 0800 028 0350 or by emailing rent.enquiries@plymouthcommunityhomes.co.uk

Look out for 'no win, no fee' claims

We're continuing to get reports of PCH residents being targeted by disreputable firms who are actively encouraging tenants of social housing associations to make disrepair claims by promising large sums in compensation.

Some firms pledge 'no win no fee' deals and urge tenants to agree to make unnecessary legal claims which can fail, leaving tenants having to pay expensive court costs. Even if claims are successful, tenants can be left with a very small amount of money after huge legal bills are deducted, or the compensation can even be less than the legal bills owed, so residents can end up in debt.

Once a tenant has signed up to a 'no win no fee' deal, they have found it very difficult to extract themselves from it without a claim being made against them by the firm they initially found helpful and supportive.

A better way

If you have already reported a repair or defect and are unhappy it has not been dealt with properly, housing associations like Plymouth Community Homes offer a clear and accessible complaints process, in line with the Social Housing White Paper pledge to help tenants of social housing associations feel empowered to make complaints when they need to.

PCH is a member of the Housing Ombudsman Service, an independent body which reviews complaints when they can't be resolved, and the Ombudsman can resolve disputes without the need for tenants to go to court.

The service is free, independent and impartial for all tenants and landlords

Complaints welcome

PCH is always working to improve services and welcomes complaints, as they can help us review the way we work and make changes when they are needed.

Residents are urged to use the complaints process in the first instance therefore, with the option to escalate an issue to the Ombudsman if it cannot be resolved, rather than risk potentially expensive court costs.

Make court action the last resort

Citizens Advice suggests court action against a landlord should be a "last resort" in matters of disrepair issues, warning it can be costly and time consuming for tenants.

The service also suggests contacting your landlord first and following their complaints process, as a court might reject your claim otherwise.



How to make a complaint at PCH

The complaints process at PCH is detailed on our website.

You can make a complaint through:

- A contact form on our website
- The MyPCH resident portal
- Social media message
- Calling us on 0808 230 6500
- In person at our offices in Plumer House
- By writing to us at Plumer House, Tailyour Road, Crownhill, Plymouth PL6 5DH

If your complaint can't be resolved quickly, it progresses to a review from more senior managers at PCH, before a final stage involving a review meeting involving staff and a Board member.

There is also an option to send the complaint to the Housing Ombudsman for an independent review if you remain unhappy.

PCH considers compensation for customers where there has been loss or damage, considered on the merit of the claim, and where there is evidence to support a compensation claim.



New planters at Sheltered Housing Scheme thanks to Janner Men's Shed

The Brake Farm Sheltered Housing Scheme in Crownhill is now home to four new planters filled with flowers and plants thanks to Gary and Sue, residents living at the scheme, and the support of The Janner Men's Shed.

Residents at the scheme wanted to extend their gardening space by adding large planting containers alongside one side of the building, making it look neater and more appealing for all.

To kickstart the project, Gary built and added a wooden frame and placed a weed-suppressing ground membrane within the frame to act as the perfect environment for their new additions. The Janner Men's Shed assisted with building the planter and were extremely helpful in allowing Gary and Sue's ideas to come to fruition.

Gary is a member of The Janner Men's Shed, which is part of a social inclusion and community engagement movement that realises the value of people working together on practical woodworking tasks on a regular basis and is supported by Plymouth Community Homes. Being part of the group has enabled him to make social connections and share skills and knowledge with likeminded individuals.

Despite Gary and Sue carrying out all the work themselves, and paying for everything out of their own pockets, they were struggling to pay for the gravel to finish the space.

Ryan Huws a Communities Worker at PCH, reached out to a contractor for PCH to ask if they would like to contribute to the project, and Mitie confirmed they wanted to give something back to the community after carrying out work in the area on behalf of PCH.

Gary said: "I want to thank The Janner Men's Shed for their help with the planters, and I also want to thank Mitie

who gave us the decorative gravel to add beneath the planters as part of their social value contribution.

"I never planted anything until now, but I really enjoyed getting stuck in, and I love watching the plants and flowers grow outside my window.

"As I have a disability I struggle to get on my knees, so having planters has enabled me to plant as much as I can with ease."

Sue added: "The bit of land where we added the planters was such a mess before, but now we have worked hard to do it up and our passion and hard work has paid off.

"I have lived here for seven years, and I have always loved flowers, and I am lucky now that every time I look out my window I can see blooming flowers.

"It is lovely to work together with Gary who is an excellent neighbour, and I am grateful for his help with this."

Ryan said: "I got to know Gary through The Janner Men's Shed and he told me how he was keen to make improvements at Brake Farm Supported Housing Scheme. He went ahead and built a number of wooden planters that now line one wall at the scheme. With the help of his neighbour, he then filled the planters with colourful and bright flowers. It's great to see people go out of their way and go that extra mile to make such wonderful improvements in their neighbourhood. This kind of thing is lovely to see."



The Janner Men's Shed

The Janner Men's Shed is part of the UK social inclusion and community engagement movement that realises the value of people coming together around practical woodworking tasks on a regular basis.

It was set up in 2017 and continues to be supported by Plymouth Community Homes (PCH). Around 20 members attend the fortnightly sessions which take place at Leigham Community Hall, and during a typical session they will have lunch together, socialise and do woodwork.

Men's Shed initiatives show health and wellbeing benefits when people, particularly older individuals, find themselves disengaged from their communities. The essence of a Shed is not a building, but the connections and relationships between its members.

PCH residents thoroughly enjoy attending the Janner Men's Shed, and Mick Vella, a member since October 2017 has been part of the group since day one.

Mick said: "I have been at the Janner Men's Shed since day one and I have enjoyed every minute of it. I lost my wife eight years ago and since then I moved from once place to another, and I didn't know anybody. When I first moved here, I was told about the Janner Men's Shed and was asked if I wanted to join and I went along to see what it was about.

"I had never put a nail in a bit of wood in all my life before joining the group, as I was a chef for over 50 years and that is all I knew. Over six years later, I still really enjoy it; I make things such as squirrel tables and renovate tables and chairs and so much more."

A laptop has recently been donated to The Janner Men's Shed as part of our Health and Housing project with Livewell Southwest, aiming to help improve the health and wellbeing of residents and to support with digital inclusion. The members will be able to keep digital records, produce their own material and now access the internet when they meet.

The Janner Men's Shed are looking for a volunteer to join and assist with the running of the project as well as supporting the secretary with minute taking and supporting the treasurer with finances. If you're interested in this role, please contact Ryan Huws at rheinallt.huws@plymouthcommunityhomes.co.uk

Become our next new Resident Board Member

We are looking for a resident to join our Board. Our Board is made up of people from all walks of life who are interested in social housing and share our values: Care, Respect, Listen and Do the right thing. Collectively they make decisions about what PCH does, make sure we deliver what promise and improve the services we provide.

We recognise the importance of having people with lived experiences of PCH services and communities involved in our decision-making process, and we are looking for individuals who are comfortable working online and attending meetings in person.

We pay our Board members a fee of £6,174 a year, and this is subject to tax and national insurance deductions. **The closing date for applications is Friday 10 November 2023.**



Find out more about the role, and our upcoming Information Session



How to avoid charges when leaving your home

When moving out of your PCH home, you should ensure the home is clear of your property, is clean, and free of damage or disrepair.

If we have to clean, clear or repair your home or garden, we will recharge you for the cost of doing so.

It is advisable before moving out, to report any routine repairs with us so they're completed before your move.

To make things easier when leaving, we've created a table that sets out the different levels of clearances for different size homes and gardens which let you know what the costs involved are likely to be.

If you have made any changes or improvements to your home, check with us if you should return it to its original state when you move out, otherwise you may be charged for the cost of any work to remedy any changes you've made.

Property Pre-clean Charges			
If your property is in an unsuitable state and requires a pre-clean before we can commence any repairs.		Pre-Clean - £156.00 Deep-Clean - £312.00	
Garden Clearance Level	Small Garden Up to 150sq mtr	Medium Garden Between 151-400sq mtr	Large Garden Larger than 400sq mtr
Level 1 - Major clearance Including self-build ponds, patios, decking, trees, shed/shed bases, along with overgrown and un-level gardens, general waste.	£1,555.20 (Up to 36 hrs labour and 2 tons mixed waste)	£3,110.40 (Up to 72 hrs labour and 4 tons mixed waste)	£5,788.80 (Up to 144 hrs labour and 6 tons mixed waste)
Level 2 - Major clearance Including sheds, patios, and decking. Large bushes and hedge reductions, along with non-native small trees, general waste.	£777.60 (Up to 18 hrs labour and 1 ton mixed waste)	£1,555.20 (Up to 36 hrs labour and 2 tons mixed waste)	£2,894.40 (Up to 72 hrs labour and 3 tons mixed waste)
Level 3 - Standard clearance Including plant pots, trampolines, and small household items.	£271.20 (Up to 8 hrs labour and 100kg mixed waste)	£417.60 (Up to 12 hrs labour and 200kg mixed waste)	£648 (Up to 18 hrs labour and 400kg mixed waste)
Level 4 Properties requiring a grass cut and bush trimming.	£129 (Up to 4 hrs labour and 50kg green waste)	£193.50 (Up to 6 hrs labour and 75kg green waste)	£258 (Up to 8 hrs labour and 100kg green waste)
Level 5 Nothing to clear.	No charge	No charge	No charge
Property Clearance Level	1 - 2 Bed	3 - 4 Bed	5+ Bed
Level 1 - Hoarded or Over-cluttered Property	£4,440 (Up to 80 hrs labour and 9 tons waste)	£6,336 (Up to 120 hrs labour and 12 tons waste)	£8,232 (Up to 160 hrs labour and 15 tons waste)
Level 2 - Full Property Clearing Including white goods, furniture, and flooring including needle sweeps/removal.	£1,180.80 (Up to 24 hrs labour and 2 tons waste)	£2,145.60 (Up to 48 hrs labour and 3 tons waste)	£3,110.40 (Up to 72 hrs labour and 4 tons waste)
Level 3 - Medium Level Clearing Including carpets, loft and shed.	£590.40 (Up to 12 hrs labour and 1 tons waste)	£1,072.80 (Up to 24 hrs labour and 1.5 tons waste)	£1555.20 (Up to 36 hrs labour and 2 tons waste)
Level 4 - Low Level Clearing Including carpets and white goods.	£84 (Up to 2 hrs labour and 100kg waste)	£168 (Up to 4 hrs labour and 200kg waste)	£336 (Up to 8 hrs labour and 400kg waste)
Level 5	No charge	No charge	No charge
Single Item Removal Charge If your property only has a single item to be removed, for example a cooker or wardrobe.	£52.80	£52.80	£52.80



October activities



Free storytelling at The Box in Plymouth - Every Friday

Join the team at The Box in Plymouth for an under-five's storytelling session under the Navy figureheads every Friday morning.

Storytelling sessions take place at 10.30am and last half an hour.

While you're there why not explore the rest of The Box. Mildred the Mammoth is always a hit with little ones.

Find out more:

www.theboxplymouth.com/events/families/family-fun-tell-me-a-story



Pipsqueak – the adventures of a magical dragon at Soapbox Children's Theatre, Devonport - 12 - 14 October 2023

The Stiltskin Theatre company are performing an enchanting tale of one boy and his dragon as they attempt to grow a prize-winning pumpkin.

Find out more and book tickets: stiltskin.org.uk/soapbox-childrens-theatre-devonport-box-office/

This family show is perfect for children aged 18-months to eight years old and runs for 80 minutes.



Myths and Magic trail at Saltram National Trust near Plymouth - 21 October - 5 November 2023

Dress in your spookiest outfit and follow this seasonal trail to discover the folklore tales and magical properties of trees at Saltram.

pumpkins hiding in the gardens. Will you spot them all this year?

Collect a wand from the wand shop at the Welcome Centre (or bring your own) and cast some spells around the garden at each of the trail points. There's also pesky

Admission is free for National Trust members.

Find out more: nationaltrust.org.uk/visit/devon/saltram/events



Boo at the Zoo - 27 October 2023

This Halloween, Dartmoor Zoo is opening its gates after dark to invite you to a truly FANG-tastic night at the zoo!

evenings, filled with shock horrors, hair raising delights and nail-biting frights...

Visit the Zoo on Friday 27th and Saturday 28th October for two FRIGHTfully good

Find out more: www.dartmoorzoo.org.uk/events/boo-at-the-zoo-2/



Halloween 2023: Spooky Science at The Box in Plymouth - 28 October 2023

Get your tricks and treats at The Box this Halloween at our special family late!

and don't forget to wear your best Halloween outfit.

Explore the galleries by night, perform a science experiment in the Learning Room, dance away to some spooky tracks

Find out more and book tickets: www.theboxplymouth.com/events/families/halloween-2023-spooky-science

SIGN UP TO MYPCH



Use MyPCH to quickly and easily check and pay your rent, report a repair and update your contact details anywhere, anytime.


mypch.plymouthcommunityhomes.co.uk


We're always keen to hear what you're up to, so if you'd like to tell us about something we can include in one of our publications, we'd love to hear it.

Email news@plymouthcommunityhomes.co.uk

Plymouth Community Homes

Plumer House, Tailyour Road, Crownhill, Plymouth, PL6 5DH

 www.plymouthcommunityhomes.co.uk

 0808 230 6500

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