

YOUR HOUSING



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Welcome to Your Housing

Our new look tenant magazine will bring you all the latest news about our Housing Improvement Programme along with updates and key information about all things housing.

In December we had an inspection from the Housing Regulator which resulted in a C4 grading. I wrote to all our tenants to advise of the outcome and to apologise for where we've not got things right. I would like to repeat that apology here.

Since the visit we have spent considerable time reflecting on the causes of the judgement and developing a plan that addresses all of the issues raised by the Regulator. You can read about this on pages 2 – 3.

The process of change across Housing Services is ongoing and we need to be available for our tenants, to listen to what you have to say and act upon that feedback. In this magazine you can find out about the ways to get involved including details of our new Tenant Forum and our membership of Tpas.

I have recently been out and about visiting tenants' homes and meeting some of you in the community. I will be doing more visits and listening to what you have to say over the coming months.

We know that sometimes we get things wrong. It is important that when we make mistakes, we acknowledge it and act upon it. In this issue you can read about the three steps to take if you have a complaint and your rights as a tenant.

We hope you enjoy the magazine. We'll be bringing you new editions regularly in the future. If there are any topics that you would like us to cover in a future issue, or you have any feedback, then do please get in touch in any of the ways mentioned in the Contact your Council section of this page.



Cllr Rob Lillis
Cabinet Member for Health, Wellbeing and Housing

Contact your Council

Castle Point Borough Council, Kiln Road, Thundersley, Benfleet, Essex SS7 1TF

Website: castlepoint.gov.uk/housing

Phone: 01268 882200



Housing Regulator Q&A with Cllr Rob Lillis

In December 2024, the Housing Regulator inspected Castle Point Borough Council's Social Housing and downgraded us to C4, meaning that there are very serious failings. We wrote to all our tenants to let them know the outcome of the inspection.

We caught up with Cllr Rob Lillis, Cabinet Member for Health, Wellbeing and Housing for an update on what we've learned since the Housing Regulator's visit, and what we're going to be doing differently in future.

Firstly, can you explain what is the Regulator of Social Housing?

The Regulator of Social Housing is the organisation responsible for setting good quality social housing standards, called the Consumer Standards. Part of the Regulator's role is to inspect social landlords like us and report on how well we're performing against the standards.

What were the causes of the C4 judgement?

We can't be confident that we will improve in the future unless we are very open and honest with ourselves about what has gone wrong in the past. We have undertaken a thorough analysis of the causes of the issues that led to the C4 judgement. We have identified that going back very many years there have been deficiencies in the way the housing service has operated which have resulted in:

- The voices of tenants not being heard or their views incorporated into service delivery
- Inadequate management of the performance of partners and contractors
- Insufficient record keeping to provide assurance of compliance with safety standards
- Infrequent reporting on the performance of the housing service to members, tenants and residents thereby missing opportunities to improve services
- Underinvestment in housing staff and resources to enable staff to perform at their best

To put things right we need to go right back to the start, looking at every aspect of the housing service and rebuild it from top to bottom.

To do this the Council has set up the Housing Improvement Programme which sets out a plan with all the activities we need to prioritise and the significant financial investment that we need to

make it happen. Alongside this we will redesign our housing services to put our tenants at the centre, making sure that our improvements come from working together.

At the Cabinet Meeting on 22 January, Cabinet confirmed the Council's commitment to a significant investment in the housing service. The report highlighted the need for over £2 million of additional staff and IT systems to deliver the improvements. And while it is not just money - it's as much about how we deliver the improvements, I hope this shows our commitment to put right the wrongs of the past and create a housing service of which we can all be proud.

Why is it so important to listen to the voices of tenants?

We can't deliver great housing services without understanding our tenants' needs and listening to their feedback. Our Tenant Forums, which were paused during the Covid pandemic, had not been brought back and we weren't giving tenants enough opportunity to contribute.

To start to put this right we have joined up with Tpas, who are a national organisation, independent of the Council, and they are experts in tenant engagement. Together with Tpas, and some feedback already provided to us by a small focus group of tenants and leaseholders, the Council will develop a new approach to engaging with our tenants. We want to hear more about what you want from us.

A new Tenant Forum will be launched so that tenants can give their views and in addition, tenant representatives will be included on the Board which oversees the Housing Improvement Programme so that they are at the very heart of our improvement journey. These are, after all, their homes.

What are the Tenant Satisfaction Measures and why are they so important?

To meet the requirements of the new Consumer Standards, we need to regularly submit data to the Regulator about tenant satisfaction. The Regulator found that this was not in place.

In future we will ensure that all housing officers, managers and members receive training in the Consumer Standards and that information on our performance is regularly reported and published.

We have also commissioned Acuity Research to collect and analyse our Tenant Satisfaction Measures data so that we can be sure that the data is independently reviewed.

One of the root causes was about managing the performance of partners and contractors.

How is that going to be put right?

In the past we have not always sufficiently checked on how well our contractors perform and, when poor performance was identified, we have not always managed it well enough.

We need to ensure that when we hire contractors, we set out clear performance targets and that we monitor what they do closely and take into account any feedback and complaints from tenants.

To put this right, we are putting in place new quality control processes to check works done and to escalate complaints. We will also be bringing the repairs and maintenance service back in-house ensuring we have better control over the service going forward.

How will the Council improve record keeping including safety compliance?

Our record keeping to date has not been good enough particularly when it comes to the data necessary to provide assurance that our safety measures are in place. As a landlord the Council might hire a contractor to do work for us, but we remain accountable for tenant safety. Unfortunately, an assessment on this matter last year revealed that data on how well work was being carried out was either not available or stored across different IT systems. That makes it impossible to accurately and quickly assess the quality of work. To address this, the Council is going to implement new software to hold complete records. We will recruit additional staff to do this and train them on the new software. We will report our performance regularly to tenants.

You mentioned that Councillors are not receiving the reports they need to. What is being done to improve reporting on the performance of the housing service?

Our analysis has shown that the Council hasn't taken into account the issues raised by tenants through the complaints process to understand where and how the service could be improved. Regular reports on the performance of the housing service should have been provided to senior managers and councillors and concerns escalated.

We have updated our Complaints Policy and will make sure that tenants understand how to use it.

While we can't guarantee that we won't make mistakes, we must learn from mistakes and not repeat them.

We are also training officers and councillors to enable them to understand all the issues and requirements in relation to the housing service.

I have already mentioned the Housing Improvement Programme and the Board which oversees it. The Board is made up of the Leader of the Council, the Deputy Leader of the Council and one Councillor each from Canvey Island and the mainland, plus myself as Chair of the Board. We will also appoint a tenant representative or representatives and we are bringing in expert independent external advisors from the social housing sector who will help the Board members to really scrutinise the changes which the Council is making, so that we do the right thing. Details of the Board meetings will be published on the Council's website.

The Council has 25 policies and procedures relating to housing on its website. What will happen to those?

Some of our policies are out of date and do not reflect changes in the law so they will be immediately reviewed, to make sure they are fit for purpose. We will ensure tenants are able to comment on them via our new engagement forums as part of the Council's approval process.

Good policies, supported by good procedures, fully trained staff and good engagement with tenants are the foundation of an excellent housing service, which is what we want to provide and what our tenants should expect.

How strong is the Council's commitment to improve?

I would like to give my assurance to tenants that we are fully committed to making the necessary changes to transform the housing service. The Housing Improvement Programme will be my top priority, and I promise to give you further updates on how we're doing in the next issue of this magazine.



Cllr Lillis on a recent housing visit with a member of the housing team

Supporting our tenants this winter



Whether it is an unexpected expense, energy costs or the weekly food shop, if you sometimes struggle to make ends meet you are not alone.

We've pulled together some resources to make sure you are claiming all the benefits you are entitled to, as well as signposting to some free support to help with budgeting and managing finances.

Don't forget that we also offer Discretionary Housing Payments to help with rent or housing costs, or an Exceptional Hardship Payment to help residents suffering financial hardship to pay their Council Tax.

Benefits

Use our benefits calculator to make sure you're claiming all the benefits that you are entitled to. You can find this on our website at castlepoint.gov.uk/benefits-calculator

If you are of state pension age, then check if you eligible for Pension Credit. Claiming Pension Credit can also entitle you to other benefits including the Winter Fuel Allowance. For more information visit gov.uk/pension-credit

If you are in receipt of a state pension and no longer receive the Winter Fuel Payment, you may be able to apply for support through the Exceptional Hardship Fund at castlepoint.gov.uk/loss-of-winter-fuel-payment

Managing your money

Take control of your finances by creating your own personal budget plan with our budgeting tool budgetnew.entitledto.co.uk/castlepoint

Citizens Advice offers an online tool to help you work out what you are earning and spending and where you might be able to cut costs. Visit citizensadvice.org.uk
Essex residents aged 19 and over can access free

numeracy courses through Multiply. These short courses can help you understand and manage money better essexopportunities.co.uk/multiply

Keeping warm

Many community groups offer Warm Welcomes with activities and support on offer as well as a warm space. Search for a Warm Welcome at warmwelcome.uk
Follow some advice on saving energy at the Energy Saving Trust energysavingtrust.org.uk

Feeding your family

If you receive certain benefits your child could be eligible for free school meals. Check your eligibility at essex.gov.uk/schools-and-learning/schools/free-school-meals

Make sure you check out Active Essex's ActivAte free school holiday and food programme activeessex.org/children-young-people/essex-activate
The Trussell Trust lists food banks across the country. Visit trussell.org.uk

Community Supermarkets offer groceries and essentials at cheaper prices than most supermarkets essex.gov.uk/help-cost-living/find-community-supermarket

Crisis support

Help is available if you are facing a financial crisis. Find out more about our Exceptional Hardship Fund castlepoint.gov.uk/exceptional-hardship-fund
If money problems are affecting your mental health please seek support. Speak to your GP or visit nhs.uk/every-mind-matters

The Mould Menace: Dealing with damp and mould in your home

Follow the steps below to help significantly reduce the risk of damp and mould in your home.



Damp and mould can be harmful to your health. Do not ignore it. If you think you have damp or mould we are here to help.

As your landlord we're responsible for making sure your property is safe and healthy. If you are experiencing mould and damp contact us and we'll help you to get rid of it.

What causes damp and mould?

Damp in houses happens when there is too much moisture inside the building. This moisture can come from various sources:

1. **Leaks:** Water can seep into your home through broken or poorly sealed roofs, windows, and walls.
2. **Condensation:** When warm, moist air inside your house comes into contact with cold surfaces like windows or walls, it turns into water droplets.
3. **Rising Damp:** This occurs when groundwater rises up through the walls and floors of a building, which happens if the property doesn't have proper damp-proofing.

When you have warmth and damp, it creates the perfect conditions for mould to grow. Mould is a type of fungus that thrives in moist, warm conditions. So, if you have areas in your home that are consistently damp, you might start to see mould patches which if left untreated can spread.

Here are some easy steps to prevent damp and mould in your home:

1. **Ventilation:** Make sure there's good airflow in your home. Open windows regularly, use extractor fans in bathrooms and kitchens, and avoid drying clothes indoors if possible. Even when it is cold, try not to close the air vents in the frames of double glazed windows.
2. **Insulation:** Proper insulation helps keep your home warm and reduces condensation.
3. **Check for leaks:** Check for any leaks in your roof, walls, windows, and plumbing.
4. **Temperature control:** Keep your home at a consistent temperature. Sudden temperature changes can lead to condensation and damp.
5. **Regular maintenance:** Regularly check for signs of damp and mould, such as musty smells or discoloured patches on walls and ceilings.

By following these steps, you can significantly reduce the risk of damp and mould in your home. To report mould in your home, please email the Council via maintenance@castlepoint.gov.uk

Arrangements will then be made for an Inspector to attend and assess your property and decide appropriate actions that may be required.

Know your rights, know how to complain

As your landlord we're responsible for fixing issues in your home or making changes you need to your home if, for example you're disabled. We can also help with antisocial behaviour, like noisy neighbours.

The Make Things Right Campaign is designed to let you know what your rights are and what you should expect from your landlord in three steps.

Know the steps to get an issue fixed

Step 1. Report it to us first. Then, if it is not fixed...

Step 2. Complain through our complaints process as detailed below, and if you're not happy with the final response from us...

Step 3. Escalate your complaint to the Housing Ombudsman.

Step 1 - How to report it to us.

Our aim is to ensure that we fix things after you have reported them, and there will be no need to complain. To report a housing repair and book an appointment.

- Use MCP's web portal Postcode Picker (mcp.community)
- The portal has helpful videos to assist you to fix the issue if you wish
- Or email: Castlepoint@mcp.community
- Or call MCP Property Services on 01268 919076

In an emergency or after hours (24/7)

- Call MCP Property Services on 01268 919076

For Gas Repairs please

- Call Sure Serve 24/7 on 01702 415891
- Or email: Chelmsford.admin@sureserve.co.uk

Step 2 – How to complain to us.

We know there are times when we get things wrong.

If you are dissatisfied with the service that has been provided, then we want to hear from you.

We will investigate the complaint and respond to you with the outcome of that complaint and any actions we intend to take. If you are still not satisfied you can submit a second stage complaint which will be considered by a senior manager. You can do this by:

- Filling in a form online at castlepoint.gov.uk/form-make-a-complaint
- Downloading a complaints form at: castlepoint.gov.uk/how-do-i-complain-about-a-council-service
- Calling us on 01268 882200
- Emailing us on — customercare@castlepoint.gov.uk
- Writing to us at Council Offices, Kiln Road, Benfleet, SS7 1TF

Step 3 - Advice about contacting the Housing Ombudsman

The Housing Ombudsman is impartial, will investigate fairly and can order landlords to take action. If the Housing Ombudsman rules against us, we must show that we are taking action within six to eight weeks. For more information visit: socialhousingcomplaints.campaign.gov.uk

Join our new Tenant Forum

Would you like to help shape and improve our housing services?

Join our new Tenant Forum where you can become a champion for tenants and:

- Give your views on Council policies including rents and services
- Advise us how to better involve tenants
- Raise any concerns about homes and housing services
- Make suggestions for improvements
- Influence how we communicate with our tenants

The Tenant Forum meets face-to-face with Council Officers in the community to regularly to look at all the issues that face tenants. Support will be available to tenants to cover expenses. Our first meeting was held in January with more dates to follow.

For more information about joining, please email tenantforum@castlepoint.gov.uk

Coming soon - the new Tenant Handbook

Look out for our new Tenant Handbook which will be launched on our website this autumn with a hard copy to follow.

Your Handbook contains all you need to know about:

- Rents
- Your tenancy agreements
- Repairs and maintenance
- Dos and don'ts to ensure your home is safe and comfortable
- Buying your home
- Ending your tenancy
- Getting involved
- How the housing service can help you
- Useful contacts
- ...and much more

The Handbook will cover all you need to know and do as a tenant, and what you can expect from the Council as your landlord. It will be available online, and reviewed yearly to ensure that it is up to date and relevant to you.



Make a splash with a free swim assessment

Does your child love to swim?

Why not see if they are ready to take the plunge into swimming lessons with a free swim assessment?

A friendly and qualified coach will assess your child's confidence in the water and swimming skills and recommend the right swimming programme.

Assessments are available at both Waterside and Runnymede.

To book, visit castlepointleisure.co.uk/book



LEARNING THROUGH PLAY

Help your child build water confidence through guided sessions designed for fun and skill development.

BOOK ONLINE AND JOIN THE FUN!

Castle Point
ACTIVE
FITNESS • WELLNESS • LEISURE • TOGETHER

Gas safety

Gas can be dangerous

There are several important things that you need to do if you smell gas; this guide will take you through the process, keeping you safe and sound should a situation arise.

If you can smell gas and you suspect that there is a leak then act straight away.

YOU MUST:

1. Turn off the gas at your meter
2. Open all doors and windows to allow ventilation
3. Do not smoke or use a naked flame
4. Do not use electrical switches on or off
5. Do not operate the door-controlled entry system from your flat
6. Leave your home and call Cadent (gas) on 0800 074 5788 giving them all the details
7. Contact our repairs service (Sure Serve) on 01702 415 891

You must remain a safe distance away from the home so that you can open the door for Cadent (gas) to attend. Failure to do this could result in Cadent (gas) carrying out a forced entry and the cost to replace the door will be charged to you.

Is your carbon monoxide detector alarm sounding?

If the carbon monoxide alarm in your home is going off, this could mean that there is carbon monoxide in the air and this could be very dangerous.

YOU MUST:

1. Turn off all gas appliances
2. Turn off the gas at your meter
3. Open all doors and windows to allow ventilation
4. Call Cadent (gas) from outside your home on 0800 111 999 giving them all the details
5. Report this our repairs service (Sure Serve) on 01702 415 891

The new Wellbeing Programme where all are welcome!

We are really excited to introduce you to the new Castle Point Wellbeing Team, a dedicated team driven by one goal: **'enhancing the quality of life and social connection of our local community!'**

Your Wellbeing Matters: Subscribe to our monthly wellbeing newsletter!

Castle Point Wellbeing Newsletter is your guide to living a healthier, happier life. It's packed with practical tips and valuable resources tailored specifically for our local community. Each month, we'll cover topics around healthy living, mental health, national and local campaigns and community connections. Here, you can discover how to access the great services offered by our community partners and local charities, including events and workshops available near you.

Subscribing is simple and free!

Just email wellbeing@castlepoint.gov.uk to join our mailing list. Don't forget to share the news with friends, family, and neighbours who might benefit too.

Six-Week Wellbeing Programme: Start your wellbeing journey now!

To start the journey to better health and stronger community connection, the Wellbeing Team has developed a unique and bespoke Six-Week Wellbeing Programme designed to help you:

- Improve physical mobility
- Enhance positive mental health
- Build meaningful connections
- Alleviate social isolation
- Reminisce, replay and reconnect

What's on offer?

- Tai Chi
- Gentle Strength & Conditioning
- Parents & Child Sessions
- Chair Yoga
- Breath & Meditation
- Sporting Memories
- Menopause Workout

Sessions will run at our Waterside Farm Leisure Centre in Canvey, and Runnymede Leisure Centre in Benfleet.

Is this for you?

The Six-Week Wellbeing Programme will be offered to everyone living in Castle Point who needs support in achieving a better and more connected lifestyle, and would like to build friendships and adopt healthier habits. There are no obligations to commit to regular participation. No memberships. Just a chance to explore, enjoy and improve your wellbeing.

Free sessions

Sessions are offered free of charge for eligible participants.

Why join?

- Discover new ways to move and relax.
- Meet like-minded people in a welcoming and supportive environment.
- Create lasting habits for a healthier, happier you!

Whether you're looking to move more, feel better, or connect with others, we've created something special for everyone in our community.

If you wish to know more about the Six-Week Wellbeing Programme, our monthly newsletter, our community partners and any other wellbeing initiatives available, simply email: wellbeing@castlepoint.gov.uk



Be scam alert!

We were recently alerted by a neighbouring Essex authority of a potential housing scam. Residents are called by a number beginning 03330 with the caller falsely claiming to be contacting about housing, damp and mould or housing repairs. If you receive any suspicious calls, we advise you to be cautious and not to give out any personal information.

If in any doubt please hang up and then contact us directly to check if the call is genuine. If someone comes to the door from the Council, they will always have their ID badge with them. Also remember that contractors will always contact you to arrange an appointment to visit or let you know when they will be visiting. When they do, they should have ID with them.






We're **tpas** members

TENANT ENGAGEMENT EXPERTS
member 2024-2025

As part of our commitment to improving engagement with tenants, we have become members of Tpas. Tpas is an independent organisation which is dedicated to bringing tenants and landlords together to improve engagement.

As Tpas members, it means our tenants can access a range of services to help you become more involved in shaping the services we offer.

By registering your details you can benefit from:

-  Skills development opportunities
-  Fortnightly electronic newsletters to keep you up-to-date on the tenant engagement agenda and housing news
-  Free webinars and online events
-  Tpas' online networking platform 'Tpas Connect' to network with other Tpas tenant members
-  Help influence national policy

Visit: www.tpas.org.uk/member-search
Find Castle Point Borough Council
and register your profile.

@TpasEngland / Tpas England





Castle Point
BOROUGH COUNCIL

Castle Point Borough Council
Email: info@castlepoint.gov.uk