

# CONNECT

The magazine for Connexus communities

Summer 2024

## Grow your own veg

Our top tips to get started

**Ask Emma**  
Getting to the  
bottom of customer  
questions and  
queries



### You're hired

11 new apprentices are  
set to join Connexus this  
summer



**High praise**  
for local volunteer



UK Government



Keep things  
**smooth**  
by making the move to  
**Universal Credit**

It won't be automatic, so look out for your letter telling you what you need to do and when. Find support and more information at [gov.uk/ucmove](https://www.gov.uk/ucmove)

**UC** *Universal  
Credit*

Eligibility criteria apply

## 4. Snapshot

News and stories from where you live.

## 6. Sharing an ambition

New Connexus campaign calls for more action to tackle rural issues.

## 8. Grow your own

Top tips to grow your own produce and give nature a helping hand at the same time.

## 10. Ask Emma

Customer questions and queries answered.

## 11. Cyber-security

News on a cyber-security incident which impacted Connexus services.

## 14. Sign-off

News and views from new Connexus chief executive Kate Smith.

## 15. Competitions

You could win £25 in vouchers in this issue's word search.



# In this Issue



## Viewpoint

# Summer arrives at last, sort of!

**W**elcome to the summer 2024 edition of **Connect** – the magazine for Connexus communities.

There were some that said it would never arrive (the summer not this mag!) but they were wrong, and a little hot weather finally hit at the end of June. To celebrate this sudden but welcome change while it lasts, we've gone all out to inject a bit of sunshine into these pages.

Check out some great tips on how to grow your own fruit and veg on pages 8 and

9, and some delightful ideas for making your own pizzas on page 12.

You can find all the usual customer stories from page 4 onwards and our word search is at the back to get stuck into as well. Finally, be sure to check out *Sign-off* on page 14, where we hear from new CEO Kate Smith on what she's found out six months into her new role at Connexus.

*Sophie*

**Sophie Mellings**  
Editor

## Snapshot

If you have a local story you'd like us to cover, get in touch with the team by emailing [connect@connexus-group.co.uk](mailto:connect@connexus-group.co.uk), calling our number **03332 31 32 33** or messaging us on social media [@weareconnexus](https://www.instagram.com/weareconnexus)

### Community

## Funding for 'wheely great' service

**Hereford based Bake and Create is hoping to expand its services thanks to a grant from the Connexus Community Development Fund.**

Bake and Create provide a meals-on-wheels service across Hereford and Fownhope, delivering between 35 and 50 home cooked meals every day.

As well as meals for vulnerable and older people, Bake and Create also run the Henffordd Gardens Café, at a Connexus

independent living scheme in Hereford.

Café manager Bonnie Collins said: "This funding will help us continue our meals-on-wheels service. We don't just provide hot meals, our visit also breaks up the isolation for people who may not see anyone else that day."

You can find out more about the meals-on-wheels service by visiting their Facebook page, calling 07929 080 991 or emailing [bakeandcreate@outlook.com](mailto:bakeandcreate@outlook.com)

## Scheme makeover

Charter Court, a Connexus Independent Living Scheme in Market Drayton, has had a makeover from contractors J Harper & Sons. As well as new kerbs, fencing and bin stores, drainage and door entry systems have been improved and there is a new road to give easier access for emergency vehicles.





Signs in the churchyard let people know about local wildlife

# High praise indeed



**Shropshire Domestic Abuse Service's (SDAS) longest-serving volunteer, Sally Cooke, received the High Sheriff's Award from Brian Welti JP, the new High Sheriff of Shropshire.**

Having volunteered with SDAS for over 14 years, Sally was honoured for her unwavering commitment and exceptional service.

Her craft and music sessions have provided vital support to vulnerable families during difficult times.

Sally also has the honour of receiving the first award from the new High Sheriff, whose role as an independent non-political Royal appointment dates back to Saxon times.

Congratulations Sally!

You can find out more about SDAS by visiting their website: [shropsdas.org.uk](http://shropsdas.org.uk)

## Local project is 'beacon' for community

**St John's Church, in Doddington near Ludlow, has recently received a grant from the Connexus Community Development Fund to support its Beacon on the Hill project.**

The funding will be used to make repairs to the building, create visitor facilities, and host activities, talks, workshops and events to promote local heritage.

A Heritage Engagement Coordinator has been

appointed and lots of activities are already taking place.

Year six pupils from the local primary school have been learning about how the churchyard is managed for wildlife and have built a bug hotel, placing a wildlife camera to discover what creatures might be visiting the churchyard when it's quiet. You can follow the progress of project on Instagram @stjohnsdoddington



Kids from the Under 8s Raptors with the new kit

**What's the story?** The Under 8s Raptors football team from Fownhope in Hereford used their Connexus Community Development Fund award to buy new equipment including goals and nets.

# Sharing an Ambition

'Rural Ambition' highlights the challenges of living in rural communities and looks at what could be done with a dramatic shift in focus.

**C**onnexus has recently launched **Rural Ambition**, calling for more action to support and develop rural communities.

It focuses on four important areas and explains what Connexus will do as well as what help is needed from partners like councils. The four areas are: more rural affordable housing; support for skills, opportunities and jobs; investment in communities; and improvements to infrastructure.

Rural Ambition argues that these would bring real benefits to rural communities – enabling people to live and work locally, fulfil their potential with long-term job



opportunities, access vital services, and create economic growth.

Colleagues at Connexus used Rural Ambition in the run up to the election to speak to candidates about these themes and how they may be able to support rural communities more if they were elected. Now the election is over, Connexus will keep the conversations going with MPs and other local representatives.

On launching Rural Ambition, new Connexus chief executive Kate Smith said that “Connexus

is committed to delivering around 200 new affordable homes each year and investing in homes it already had” but that a “dramatic shift was needed from local and national government” to achieve more.

“Rural Ambition sets out how this could be achieved through better partnership working and by delivering joint plans that address local issues,” Kate added.

The ideas and themes in Rural Ambition are echoed by other campaigning organisations like the National Housing Federation through their long-term plan for housing. Many rural providers are also calling for action, arguing affordable housing plays a huge part when it comes to thriving communities.

Left - new Connexus homes in Much Wenlock. Below - CEO Kate Smith talking about Rural Ambition at a national housing conference.



Above - Connexus' Amanda Pyke with Liberal Democrat candidate Michael Green, on a pre-election visit to the Younger Persons Service in Ludlow.

## Find out more

If you'd like to read Rural Ambition or talk to Connexus about the commitments it has made, please email [ruralambition@connexus-group.co.uk](mailto:ruralambition@connexus-group.co.uk) or visit [www.connexus-group.co.uk/rural-ambition](http://www.connexus-group.co.uk/rural-ambition)

## Jobs

# 11 new apprentices to start careers



Current apprentices Seb and Noah, with mentor Sue Reynolds

**11 new apprentices will be joining the Connexus team this summer in a range of roles across the business.**

The new recruits will be working in business and administration, plumbing, carpentry, customer services and electrical installation. They will be getting hands-on experience with the organisation and studying

towards a qualification in their chosen field.

Connexus apprentices receive the national living wage, and up to 30 days holiday, as well as training and development opportunities.

Many apprentices also choose to stay with the business, going on to have successful careers. For more information visit [connexus-group.co.uk/apprenticeships](http://connexus-group.co.uk/apprenticeships)

## Listening at Sandpits

**Local residents from Sandpits Avenue and the surrounding area in Ludlow recently attended a public consultation meeting.**

The session, held at the Rocksprings centre, was an opportunity for colleagues from Connexus to update local residents on refurbishment work that

was planned and to apologise for delays and other things that hadn't gone well in the project so far. Future meetings are planned with Connexus teams aiming to work more closely with the local community in and around Sandpits Avenue, acting on environmental concerns and providing more habitat for wildlife.

# Grow your own and give nature a hand

Growing fruit and vegetables from seed can seem daunting, but it's quite easy and the best part is you don't need a garden

**There are many great reasons for growing your own – prices in the shops, better flavours than shop-bought, reducing food miles – but perhaps you don't think growing is for you? Don't have much space, or think it will cost too much? Well, we're going to show there's no barriers to growing tasty salads and herbs.**

## Look for a location

If you don't have a garden, you can grow right in your kitchen, or any windowsill that gets sun (though too much sun frazzles tender shoots). Kitchens are best because it's where you can see it, you don't have

to fetch water, and you'll use the results there, but anywhere sunny where it won't get knocked is fine.

## Pottering around

You also need stuff to grow in. Cheap supermarket pots and a growbag will last ages, but you don't even need those. You just need a small container, and some soil.

Empty fruit punnets make great mini seed trays, or you could use (clean) food tins as plant pots. Remember to put small holes in the bottom for water to drain out, and a drip tray to collect it – which can be made by using plastic lids.

If compost and growbags are out, use what you can find. Seeds need fine soil – it's hard for seedlings to move stones and lumps. Used coffee grounds can be useful to help lighten the soil.

## Sow what now?

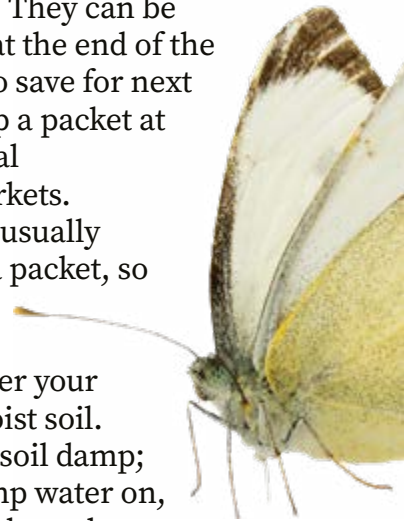
Finally, you need seeds. Packets are usually cheap, especially online (although watch for

postage). They can be cheaper at the end of the season, to save for next year – 10p a packet at some local supermarkets.

There's usually loads in a packet, so sprinkle them lightly over your loose, moist soil. Keep the soil damp; don't dump water on, it can wash seeds or seedlings away. Be careful, or poke holes in the cap of a pop bottle and use it as a sprinkler.

Once the seedlings have four leaves, gently tease them out and put individuals into larger pots (or tins). It'll take a few weeks for these to grow enough to harvest properly, but if you're growing salad leaves or herbs, you can just use the extra seedlings.

Microgreens means using lots of tiny leaves instead of fewer big leaves. Lettuce, herbs and pea shoots taste great in a salad, no need to wait for the plant to grow. Cut a bunch with scissors and keep reseeded regularly for future harvesting.







# Shared garden blooms

## Just add nature

Growing fruit and vegetables will help give our pollinators a welcome boost when plants flower, but there are loads of other things you can do to attract wildlife into your garden or green space. Here's our top three things to try.

### 1. Make a little space

If you have unused space in your garden, why not dedicate a bit of it to nature. A pile of dead twigs, leaves or stones can make places for small creatures such as insects and amphibians to hide. Planting wildflowers (see below) in the ground can bring a corner to life, just make sure to use poor quality soil.



**Craven Arms Community Garden had a winter makeover thanks to a £1,500 grant from the Connexus Community Development fund.**

New fruit trees and bushes were planted late last year and are now bursting with buds, promising a bountiful harvest this autumn.

Work on reviving the garden began by relocating existing plants to create a beautiful cottage garden in a previously unused area. The ground was then cleared, new paths laid, and a pagoda and garden bench installed to provide seating and shade.

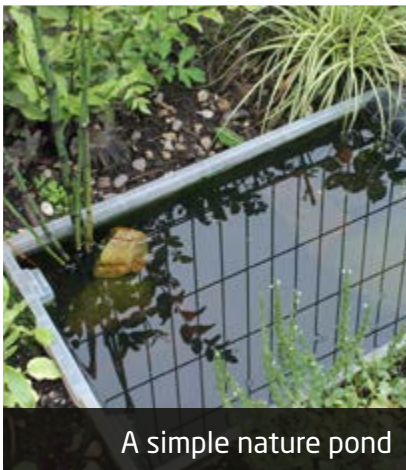
As well as the fruit trees and bushes, other edible plants and flowers have been added including rosemary, mint, lavender, beans and nasturtiums. Roses and other flowers have been planted to attract pollinating insects.

### 2. The best things in life are free

As mentioned, scattering wildflower seeds is a good way to attract insects such as bees and butterflies. And the best part is, you can often get these for free! Search online for *free wildlife seeds UK* and you should find lots of freebies!

### 3. Just add water

Even a small amount of water such as an old metal bin lid will provide insects, birds and small animals somewhere to drink in hot weather. If you want to take it further, add a liner to a large pot, although a reclaimed sink can also work and doesn't need the liner. If you want to attract insects, frogs or toads, make it easy for them to get in – and out!



A simple nature pond



# Ask Emma

Each issue customer services manager Emma gets to the bottom of your questions. If you have something you'd like answered, please email [connect@connexus-group.co.uk](mailto:connect@connexus-group.co.uk) or write to us at the usual address.

## Q. Why do I have to pay 51 or 53 weeks rent this year?

A. Your rent is charged every Monday, and this financial year has 53 Mondays. This occurs every five or six years due to the extra days accumulating from 365-day and 366-day years, adding an extra week.

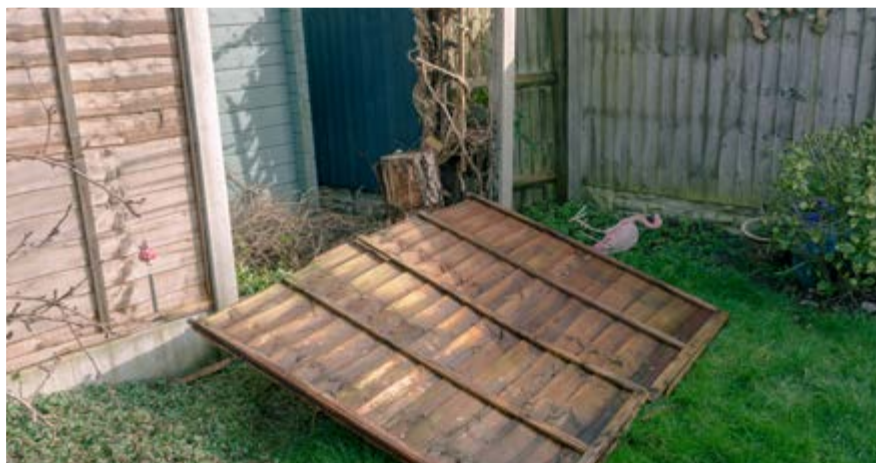
If you pay your rent weekly, you won't see any difference, just keep paying your rent every week as normal.

However, if you pay your rent monthly we need to calculate things slightly differently to make sure you don't fall into arrears.

If you get two 'rent free' weeks, then you will be charged for 51 weeks.



This year has 53 Mondays, adding an extra rent week



To find out if a fence belongs to you call us on 03332 31 32 33

If you receive Universal Credit not all of your housing costs will be covered (as they do not take 53-week payment years into account), so please contact us and we can advise you on the best way to manage this.

If you are finding it difficult to pay your rent, please contact us to discuss this – we can help. If you live in supported accommodation including Independent Living Schemes, please contact your Independent Living Coordinator or Support Worker who will be able to help you.

## Q. My fence is damaged and needs to be repaired, is this my responsibility or do I need to report it to Connexus?

A. Unless stated in your tenancy agreement, fencing is usually the customer's responsibility except for privacy panels or if it's next to a public path, car park or public road. Customers are responsible for maintaining or repairing any damage to fencing they, their household, visitors, or pets have caused.

To find out if the fence belongs to you or call us on 03332 31 32 33.



Get in touch before putting up your own fence

### Q. What if I want to put up my own fence?

A. You can put up your own fence or replace the existing fence, as long as you get written permission from us first. This is so we can check underground plans and we'll need to agree the type of fencing you can put up.

You can find out more about fencing in the Repairs Policy on our website [connexus-group.co.uk](http://connexus-group.co.uk) or call us and we can send you a copy.

### Q. My eyesight is failing, and I find it hard to read letters from you, is there anything you can do to help?

A. Yes, we can make what is known as a reasonable adjustment to how we contact you. This means making a change to the way that we usually deliver our services to ensure we take account of individual needs where possible.

So, if you're struggling to read letters, we could make a note on your file to always provide letters in large print if that would help.

Visit our website to find out more about the reasonable adjustments we can make or call us on 03332 31 32 33 and we can send you a leaflet and Reasonable Adjustment request form.

# Online Connexus cyber-security incident



There is no indication at this stage that customer details were stolen

### In December 2023, Connexus experienced a cyber-security incident, which involved unauthorised access to its systems.

The IT team at Connexus worked quickly to contain the situation, switching off systems to protect customer data. All relevant authorities, including the ICO and the Regulator of Social Housing, were informed.

Since then, teams have been working with cybersecurity specialists to investigate what happened and bring systems and services back online safely. Many Connexus services are now running as usual, however there still may

be slight differences to how these are delivered, which teams will explain when customers get in touch.

Any cyber security incident can be unsettling to read about, however there is no indication at this stage that customer details have been stolen in the incident.

Connexus will continue to update customers, clients and partner organisations as required and will write to anyone affected if it is necessary to do so.

To find out more about the incident, visit the FAQ on the Connexus website or request a copy by getting in touch using any of the methods described on page 15.

## Pizza Ingredients

- Tomato puree or ready-made pizza sauce
- Grated cheese (not so much that it doesn't melt evenly)
- Sliced tomato
- Sliced mushrooms
- Sliced red onion
- Sliced peppers
- Cooked ham
- Fresh rocket/basil

## For the salad dressing

- 1 tbsp vinegar
- 3 tbsp olive oil
- 1/2 tsp honey
- Pinch of salt and pepper

Making homemade pizzas can be fun and is a great way of using up leftover ingredients that might end up in the bin

## Quick snacks

# Homemade pizza

**It's really quick and simple to make your own pizzas. The hardest part is choosing what base you want and which toppings. We've added some suggestions for toppings up above, but feel free to experiment and see what works for you!**

You can make your own pizza base (it's not easy but there are loads of recipes online) or buy fresh or frozen ones which can be found in most supermarkets. Alternatively, you can use a

tortilla wrap or cut a baguette in half — both work well.

### Method (pizza serves 2)

**1.** Preheat your oven to 180C/gas mark 4.

**2.** Prepare and chop all your toppings.

**3.** Put your selected pizza base on an ovenproof dish, spread a layer of your tomato sauce on the top leaving a 1cm edge.

**4.** Place your toppings onto the tomato sauce. Top tip: place them evenly on your base to avoid uneven cooking.

**5.** Once you're happy with your toppings, sprinkle your grated cheese on top.

**6.** Place in the oven for 8-10 minutes. Check everything looks cooked, then place on a plate and slice your pizza. Top tip: If you wait a minute or so before cutting, the cheese should harden a little and make it easier to handle.



## Mix it up Salad

On page 8 and 9 there are some great tips on how to grow your own produce in your garden or even on a windowsill. Salad grown at home can be used to make a great accompaniment to any homemade pizza.

You can stick to the staples like salad leaves, lettuce, tomatoes, cucumber or push the boat out with nuts, seeds, or even a sliced hardboiled egg.

The salad dressing is optional, but adds a bit of zing and makes the whole thing come together.

### Method (serves 2 to 4)

1. Place all the ingredients for the salad dressing (see top left) in a bowl and mix together until mustard has dissolved.
2. Add your lettuce to the bowl first and mix, then add your remaining salad ingredients.
3. Serve on a plate next to your pizza. Place any leftovers in a bowl, cover with a plate or cling film and refrigerate for the next day.



## Financial help

# What are you entitled to claim?



Billions of pounds goes unclaimed each year in benefits

**Every year billions of pounds of benefits go unclaimed, which is money people are entitled to. Many don't realise the money could be theirs and miss out on claiming as a result.**

That's why Connexus provides useful links on its Financial Support and Benefits web page to the independent benefit calculators so you check if you're claiming everything your entitled to.

Age UK and Independent Age can provide support and advice for older people to do a free benefits check.

If you would like to speak to someone instead, Connexus' tenancy sustainment team can go through which benefits you can claim and help with applications.

You can call them on 03332 31 32 33 or send an email to [tenancysustainmentteam@connexus-group.co.uk](mailto:tenancysustainmentteam@connexus-group.co.uk)

## Voice of the customer

**Involved customers help shape and improve Connexus services to make things better for everyone.**

Becoming an involved customer is also a great way to use your existing skills or to learn new ones as training and support is provided to help you get the most out of being involved.

There are lots of ways to get involved depending on how much time you have and what you're interested in, everything from completing a survey to joining the board.

To find out more visit [connexus-group.co.uk/be-involved](http://connexus-group.co.uk/be-involved) or call the customer engagement team on 03332 31 32 33.

Below: New Connexus chief Kate Smith (left) with site manager Glynn Rees (right) on a recent visit to new development The Full Pitcher in Hereford.



## Chief executive's update

# Understanding your priorities

**M**y first few months at Connexus have involved getting out and about, learning what makes the organisation tick.

I've been fortunate enough to meet plenty of customers across our counties. It's been useful to hear feedback first hand, and to understand more about your priorities.

It's clear that we need to continue improving, especially when it comes to repairs and major refurbishments. Our services need to be easier to

access and we need to provide more opportunities for you to have your say, challenge us, and get involved. We also need to work more closely with our local councils and partners to jointly solve some of the issues we are facing in our rural communities.

**“It's clear that we need to continue improving”**

To make these changes happen we'll be revisiting our corporate plan, which was launched last year. This will put even more focus on developing our repairs service, making the best use of the homes we already have, and delivering the customer service improvements we know customers really want. As I've

mentioned, we're also keen to improve our partnership working and have developed Rural Ambition (page 6) to support this work.

This is an ambitious programme, but it is important to have this focus if we're to support customers and rural communities in what is still a very challenging time for people financially.

I look forward to meeting more of you soon and listening to your thoughts and feedback.

**Kate Smith**  
Chief Executive



## Fruity word search

Here is a list of 25 words associated with fruit, but which one is missing from the word search?

X	N	I	B	L	A	C	K	B	E	R	R	Y	O	H
P	P	F	H	E	I	M	J	W	P	Y	W	Z	W	Y
E	Q	U	I	N	C	E	O	M	B	A	N	A	N	A
A	M	M	A	V	O	C	A	D	O	I	X	Y	H	F
R	P	O	M	E	G	R	A	N	A	T	E	M	D	I
O	R	A	N	G	E	A	D	N	G	S	J	A	A	G
U	O	I	K	R	E	D	C	U	R	R	A	N	T	D
C	O	C	O	N	U	T	K	T	A	T	E	G	E	A
M	R	C	M	U	L	I	M	E	P	Q	N	O	T	M
B	A	L	E	M	O	N	Z	P	E	A	C	H	J	S
C	H	E	R	R	Y	A	R	H	U	B	A	R	B	O
P	S	T	T	A	N	G	E	R	I	N	E	E	W	N
L	N	S	T	R	A	W	B	E	R	R	Y	P	P	T
U	G	R	E	E	N	G	A	G	E	C	V	X	D	E
M	E	A	P	R	I	C	O	T	W	K	I	W	I	Y

- |             |            |            |      |
|-------------|------------|------------|------|
| POMEGRANATE | BLACKBERRY | STRAWBERRY | KIWI |
| REDCURRANT  | GREENGAGE  | TANGERINE  | DATE |
| APRICOT     | AVOCADO    | COCONUT    | PEAR |
| BANANA      | APPLE      | DAMSON     | PLUM |
| QUINCE      | CHERRY     | LEMON      | FIG  |
| ORANGE      | RHUBARB    | GRAPE      |      |
| MANGO       | PEACH      | LIME       |      |

### Editorial and design

Sophie Mellings  
Jo Maguire  
Richard Goodwin  
Steve Atkin

### Printing

Orphans Press

### Write to us

Connexus,  
The Gateway,  
The Auction Yard,  
Craven Arms,  
SY7 9BW

### Telephone

03332 31 32 33

### General enquires email

hello@connexus-group.co.uk

### Ask Emma a question or have your say on the magazine

connect@connexus-group.co.uk

### Connexus website

www.connexus-group.co.uk

### On social media

@weareconnexus

Next edition due winter 2024.

Well done to everyone who entered the festive word search last time. The missing word was **coal**. The winner of the £25 Amazon voucher was Mr Stokes from Ludlow.



The word missing from the word search is .....

Name ..... Address .....

The first correct answer drawn from entries will win £25 in Amazon vouchers. Draw closes Friday 18 October 2024. To enter, cut out this section of the page and send in an envelope to **Connexus, The Gateway, The Auction Yard, Craven Arms, SY7 9BW** or email us your answer (including your full name and address) to **connect@connexus-group.co.uk** - good luck! For full terms and conditions visit the Connexus website.



HM Government

# Social housing issue? Know how to complain.

1

**Report** it to your landlord.

2

**Complain** to your landlord,  
if you're still not happy.

3

**Escalate** to the Housing  
Ombudsman, if you're not  
happy with your landlord's  
final response.



Make  
things right

Everyone deserves a safe  
and secure home. **Know your rights.**

Visit [gov.uk/social-housing](https://www.gov.uk/social-housing)

