

SUMMER 2024

CROMWOOD PEOPLE

Your tenant newsletter



SUMMER LOVING Settling down with Paul and Karen

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13 Keeping our residents safe from harm

CROMWOOD
HOUSING GROUP





'I don't want to sit here in a job that I don't care about. I want to make a difference.'

THOMAS NOLAN
Tenancy and lettings manager

Welcome

Welcome to this summer's edition of *Cromwood People*.

Our organisation continues to expand both in London and Greater Manchester as we strive to play our part in meeting the growing demand for social housing.

It's very much about sustainable growth. I believe it is vital that we not only provide more much-needed homes but do so while maintaining our high standards in terms of both the quality of accommodation and the support that comes with it.

In this edition, I'm pleased to share more of the feedback you gave us earlier in the year when we conducted tenant surveys. We also have an interview with Thomas Nolan, our tenancy and lettings manager for Greater Manchester, who really embodies the Cromwood ethos and the importance we place on attention to detail.

Thomas has put together a piece explaining our approach to safeguarding, which I hope you will find informative and helpful.

As always, I'd like to thank Karen and Paul for being the latest residents to share their stories with us. I hope they inspire you to get in touch and tell us about your journey and how you became a Cromwood tenant.

Please get in touch if you have any ideas for the next edition of *Cromwood People*.

Moses Hirschler

Chief Executive, Cromwood Housing Group



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About us

Cromwood was set up in 2002 to help address the serious shortage of social housing in London.

Our vision is to provide decent and safe accommodation where our tenants can rest, receive support, and plan for the future.

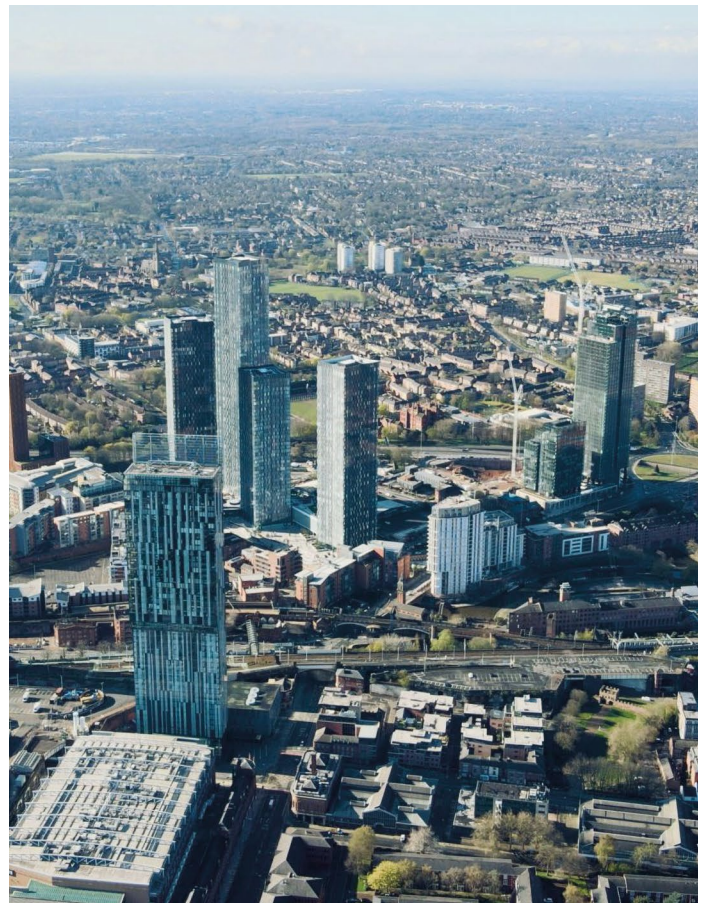
We are a private business, approved by the UK government to provide social housing. This means we are accountable to the housing regulator, our tenants, and our board of directors.

We currently house more than 3,000 people in London and Greater Manchester in properties we lease, manage or own.

As a mission-led business, we provide services that make a real difference to people's lives.

Strategic partners, such as the Greater London Authority, provide funding for new housing to tackle rough sleeping and house people fleeing domestic violence. Other organisations such as Solace and Thames Reach work with us to ensure that tenants get the support they need to maintain their tenancies and get back on their feet.

Over the coming years, we aim to increase the number of people we house and have an even greater impact in London and Greater Manchester. For us, success means high quality, affordable housing, strong partnerships, and good communication to help our business and our tenants move onwards and upwards.



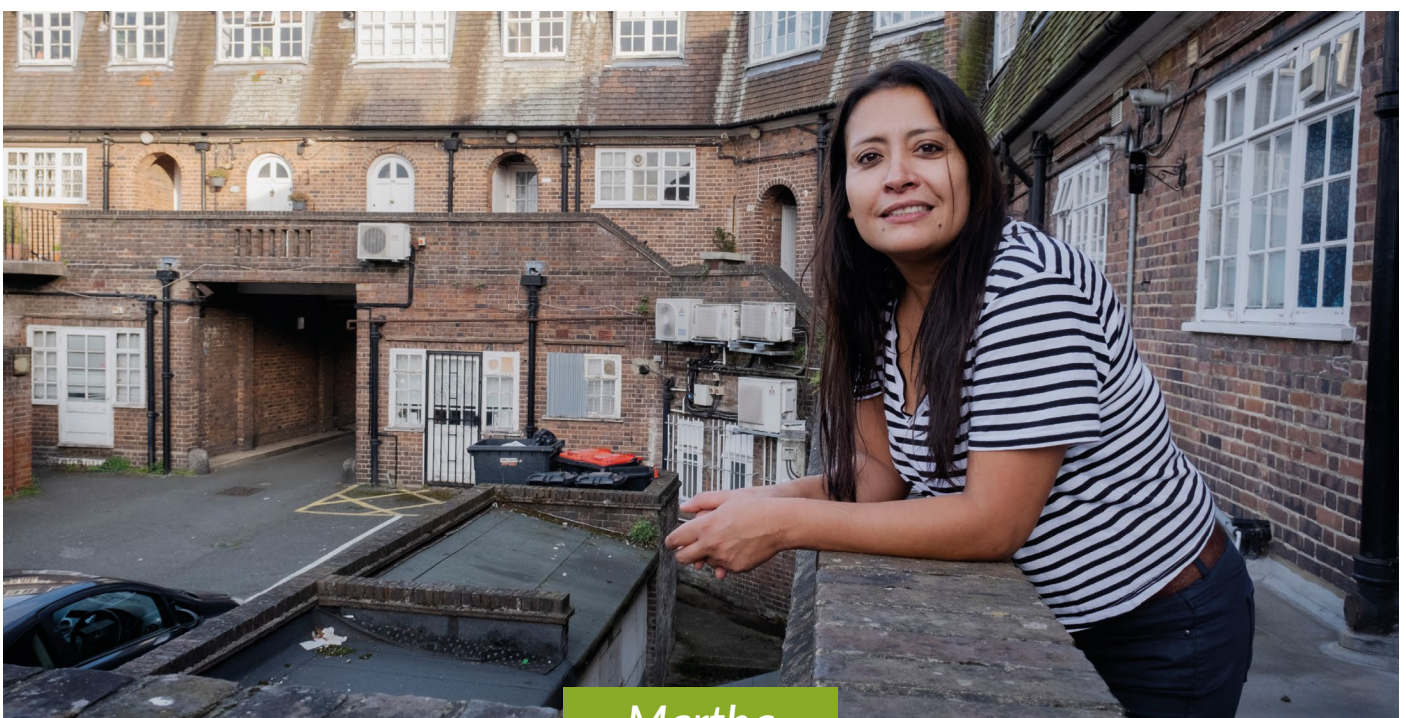
Why your views are key to improving our services



Decent housing can help people transform their lives. Good communication with our tenants is also critical to help us improve services and support our tenants to start planning a positive future, says Kevin Murphy, Cromwood's Strategic Director.

At the end of 2023, Cromwood carried out two tenant surveys. The first asked tenants for feedback through a range of questions framed around the Tenant Satisfaction Measures (TSM). These measures were designed by the Regulator of Social Housing to find out whether tenants are receiving the standard of services that they have a right to expect from a registered social landlord such as Cromwood.

We were pleased with the results, which showed that Cromwood is performing well on everything from the quality of our homes to action on repairs. We scored above average in 11 out of the 12 measures. Overall, seven in 10 tenants told the independent researchers who carried out this survey that they were happy with their homes and with their relationship with Cromwood.



Martha

David



Habiba



In addition to the TSM exercise, we also designed a separate, more in-depth telephone survey to explore whether our approach was having a positive impact on people's lives.

Safe and secure housing is, of course, an end in itself. Having a place to cook, get a good night's sleep, or invite friends and family can transform someone's life. But we know that a secure home is also a means to an end – providing a place and a space for people to explore new possibilities and begin to reshape their future. We commissioned the second survey to assess these wider and sometimes less tangible benefits.

The initial results from our telephone interviews were encouraging. The majority of respondents (89%) said their property was comfortable and felt like home. One respondent said, 'I'm very lucky to live in a clean, safe environment. There's no issues or troubles.' Another liked her new home so much that she asked if she could buy it!

Often, when people first come to Cromwood, there has been some kind of crisis in their lives. When they feel settled enough to start planning for the future, it suggests that they're moving out of survival mode and can think about enhancing their quality of life. When we asked about this in our survey, 81.5% said they could start planning ahead – for example, by looking for work.

A real highlight of the survey were the many positive comments about our staff, which led 85% to say that Cromwood cares about their wellbeing.

A tenant in southeast London said, 'They have helped me from the beginning to find a very nice place for me and my daughter. They also check up on us and the flat. If we have issues in the house, they come to fix it.' Another said, 'Everything I ask for they do, and they're there when I need them.'

Of course, we know that it's not all perfect, and we are always looking for honest feedback so we can improve and change things for the better. For example, while tenants were generally impressed with the speed and quality of repairs, some told us they experienced slow response times.

Often such issues can be a matter of better communication, which is vital so that tenants are aware of how best to contact us, how to let us know if they're not going to be in, and how our priority system works.

Clear communication will also help tenants see what action we have taken, give timescales for the next steps and include appropriate signposting to clarify who they should contact for problems involving other organisations or authorities, such as conditions in their local park, for example.

We will continue to listen and engage. Later this year, we are planning our second tenant satisfaction survey, so please look out for this, and we encourage you to take part. The more we can learn about your needs and about how we are doing, the better we can do in improving our services and in building understanding so that we can all move forward together.

Thank you for your time and support.

Kevin Murphy

Strategic Director, Cromwood Housing Group



Safe as Houses

There's a new fire starter in town. Make sure you stay safe.

Those old enough to remember £1 notes, might recall stories about fires caused by chip pans, paraffin heaters, and people who fell asleep with a cigarette in their hand. Those issues haven't entirely disappeared, but, today, there is a growing threat from a very modern invention – e-scooters and e-bikes.

Sales of e-bikes have soared in recent years, partly due to their popularity with fast food deliverers. Some of these bikes and scooters are produced in factories; they are tested for safety and come supplied with the appropriate battery and charger. Others are made by converting push bikes into electric bikes using battery packs and chargers known as conversion kits. At present, conversion kits are not regulated, which means that it is hard to know if they're safe.

Last year, research by the London Fire Brigade found there was a house fire related to e-scooters and e-bikes every two days, and the number of fires was rapidly rising. One problem arises when the charger and battery are incompatible. If the charger is too powerful for the battery, it can cause the battery to explode, starting a fire and releasing toxic fumes.

Problems can also arise when the manufacturer's guidance isn't followed or when batteries are damaged.

These simple precautions can keep you, your home, and your household safe:

- Use the correct charger for your e-bike
- Unplug your charger once the battery is charged
- Charge batteries on a hard, flat surface, away from main entrance/exits
- Allow your battery to cool before using it again
- Buy batteries and chargers from a trusted source and ensure they are properly fitted.
- If you can, store your e-bike away from the house (e.g. in a garden shed or garage)
- Keep all exit routes free from obstruction,

including communal areas

- Close all fire doors, especially at night
- Don't leave your electric bike or scooter to charge overnight or when there is no-one at home.
- Never tamper with or try to modify the battery
- Don't expose the battery to extremes of temperature



KEEPING YOUR HOME SAFE

Of course, there's more to home safety than the threat from fires. We're pleased to say that all Cromwood homes meet or exceed the Decent Homes Standard and we'd like to keep it that way.

The Decent Homes Standard is the minimum level required by law. It is currently under review but, broadly speaking, it means that your home should be in a reasonable state of repair, with a decent kitchen and bathroom, heating that works, and no damp or mould that could seriously affect your health. Where there are issues, we will find them and fix them.

In addition to our annual gas inspections, we are in the process of carrying out a survey to check the condition of every property we manage. Once we've completed the surveys and any work required, we'll start all over again. Our intention is to survey all of our houses every three years.

Surveys are non-intrusive and are generally carried out in a single visit of 1-2 hours. We will phone to arrange appointments in advance. Please ensure you give our surveyors access at the agreed time. If you are unable to keep an appointment, let us know as soon as you can.

For more information, please get in touch – see contact details on page 14.

KAREN & PAUL'S STORY:

“No place like home”

Reunited after more than 25 years apart, Karen and Paul soon found themselves on the streets of Manchester in the middle of winter. They explain how they got to within touching distance of their happy ever after.



Romance often gets a bad press: it's the stuff of pounding hearts, dramatic sighs, and bright pink verse. Paul and Karen's story is reinforced with backbone and grit – and they've needed every bit of it.

Chapter one of their story sounds familiar. Love blossomed in their teens and grew until Karen's parents moved from Salford to London, putting more than 200 miles between them. Karen was 15, Paul was a few years older.

They kept in touch and Karen always said that if Paul came back into her life, it would be him and only him, but the distance between the Irwell and the Thames proved too much.

Fast forward to May 2022. Now in their 40s, Karen was miserable in London and Paul was sofa surfing in Salford.

'I was here, there, and everywhere. I wasn't secure or stable,' says Paul. Then, Karen got in touch and asked if they could meet. She wanted to leave London and move back up north. They met in Manchester, moved in with Paul's friend and became inseparable. But in December 2022 the dream turned sour.

One night, soon after Christmas, Paul's friend kicked them out. 'It was 4 o'clock in the morning and he threw us out. It was freezing.' They had a change of clothes and very little money. They walked the streets for a while, sat in a bookmakers shop to get out of the cold, and eventually went to a spiritualist church to warm their bones.

'They helped us so much,' says Paul. 'They kept the church open until 7pm, gave us a number for an organisation that could give us a room for the night, and money for a taxi. One day I'm going to go back and thank them; stand up and tell everyone what they did for us.'

At first, they stayed in emergency accommodation. They had a roof over their heads, but they didn't feel safe. Eventually, they were assessed as being statutorily homeless.



“The things Cromwood has done for us and helped us out with are unreal.”

'Statutory homelessness means that they have a duty to rehouse you, but there's nowhere,' says Paul.

This, too, is a familiar story. Councils across the land have a duty to house homeless people but don't have the stock to meet burgeoning demand, or the resources to develop new housing. Working around these constraints, Greater Manchester mayor Andy Burnham launched a special scheme (see box) to tackle homelessness and keep people off the streets.

A partner on the scheme since it began in 2018, Cromwood provides housing and housing management, while the local authority provides tenants and tenant support. Paul and Karen are effusive in their praise for their 'supportive and helpful' housing worker from Salford Council and for Cromwood's housing officer, also called Paul.

In February 2023, the couple walked up the path to a two-bed redbrick terrace managed by Cromwood as part of the scheme.

The minute they met Paul, they instantly felt at home. 'He was here to meet us. He said anything you need, any problems, we'll sort it out. He made us feel so good and welcome.'

When Karen – who is awaiting an operation on her foot – said she found it difficult to climb the stairs, Paul offered them a downstairs room and furnished it with a new bed, bedding, blinds and curtains. When they had a leak, it was fixed the next day. The 'ropey' carpet in the living room was swiftly changed and the broken lock on the back door was quickly sorted out.

'The things Cromwood has done for us and helped us out with are unreal,' says Paul.

In return, Paul, Karen, and the couple they shared with, kept the place so pristine that when the cleaner arrived to spruce up the communal area, there wasn't not much to do.

The homelessness scheme doesn't offer a secure tenancy, but it's several steps in the right direction. The council also assured the couple that they wouldn't find themselves on the street, which gave them 'peace of mind', says Paul.

Karen says it can 'take the worst to bring out the best' but 'everything we've been through together has made us stronger'. She says: 'He was my first love and it never went. We can cope with anything!'

** Since Paul and Karen were originally interviewed for this article, we are pleased to report that their lives – and their housing situation – have progressed. They are now living together in a flat in a market town near Bury in Greater Manchester and remain optimistic about the future.*



ROUGH SLEEPERS SCHEME

The special scheme set up by Greater Manchester mayor Andy Burnham supports people sleeping rough or at risk of sleeping rough. Cromwood has been a partner since it began in 2018 and currently has 23 properties in use for the scheme.

People live in shared houses; some properties are single sex and others are for couples. Initially, rooms were shared between two individuals who didn't know each other, but since COVID it's one person or one couple per room. People have their own lockable bedrooms and share the bathroom, kitchen, and living room.

Cromwood provides furniture, bedding, pots and pans and a kettle as well as property maintenance including weekly cleans of the communal areas. The local authority provides personal support, for example help to register with GPs or access mental health support.

People can be moved with very little notice or stay for years. When people move out, Cromwood aims to turn properties around within 24 hours. In 2023, Cromwood housed 1,252 tenants in Manchester: 427 people through the mayor's scheme, 735 under the Nightly scheme and 90 offenders.



Thomas Nolan

Tenancy and lettings manager

MEET THE TEAM

'The secret to good management is learning from tenants, listening to staff and freedom from bureaucracy.'
Thomas Nolan reflects on his first year as Manchester's tenancy and lettings manager.

After 30 years in social housing, Thomas Nolan could be forgiven for wanting to recline his way into retirement, but that isn't who he is. 'I don't want to sit here in a job that I don't care about,' he says. 'I want to make a difference.'

Thomas, who manages the team responsible for tenancies and lettings in Manchester, has worked as a housing officer, team leader, housing manager, and regional manager. He made the move to Cromwood after spending a year nursing his mother back to health.

'Coming from social housing to Cromwood has been brilliant. It doesn't have the same level of red tape and so it can make decisions quickly which are supported by the regional manager. The change has been unbelievable,' he says. 'We offer a good service to meet the needs of local authorities who need assistance finding temporary accommodation for people.'

He defines good service in terms of proactive property management, responding to tenant needs, having adaptable team members that can embrace new ways of working and thrive in a positive environment.

One of the things that sets Cromwood apart from its competitors, he believes, is its skill in carrying out housing inspections and ensuring all tenants are safe in their properties.

'A baby in Rochdale died due to damp and mould, which put the issue at the top of the national agenda. We are skilled at identifying bad mould and ensuring that it is dealt with quickly. We are ahead of the game in identifying risk. And we work in partnership with our maintenance colleagues to reduce any risks within our properties.'

Risk to tenants is also often linked to person-centred issues. That's where relationships with tenants and with partner agencies can make a significant difference.

'In one case, six different agencies were involved because drug dealers were threatening a tenant. We had regular operational meetings with the council to help resolve the issue.'

'Cromwood is good at identifying issues with tenants, for example if they're being financially abused or if there's domestic violence. It takes a few minutes to report safeguarding concerns and we work with all our stakeholders and attend multi-agency meetings to assist with any issues identified.'

Underlying this commitment to good service, is a deep respect for what each staff member brings. 'I'm not an autocratic manager,' he says. 'I like to manage proactive teams who feel free to challenge. It's healthy creating this type of environment where staff feel empowered to make decisions, work together and feel part of something special. I see myself as a support to the team. We have regular fortnightly meetings to discuss cases, and a clear agenda that links in with our training.'

A culture in which staff welcome complaints is part of that healthy ecosystem. 'Complaints are a way of improving,' he states. 'I say to staff, if tenants want to complain that's fair enough, what are the reasons? How can we learn? How can we improve? What are the overall learning outcomes?'

Listening to individual tenants at a particular point in time is good management. Listening to all tenants over a period of time is intelligent

management. Cromwood uses its intelligence to head off common, predictable problems.

'In the run-up to winter we check boilers as part of our inspections programme. If someone comes in to say their boiler isn't working and the pressure is down, it's fixed straight away. If it's winter and there's a bigger problem, we send an engineer within 24 hours.'

As he marks his first anniversary at Cromwood, he is focused on how to make a good service better. He loves receiving feedback including

through tenant surveys, with their potential to tune into the needs of specific client groups, pinpoint areas of improvement and create targeted action that builds trust and lifts the service to new heights.

Carried out correctly, surveys are the gift that keeps on giving. But until they can be put in place, he and his team know that feedback is valuable, whether it looks like praise or a complaint. 'The most important things to work through are what tenants are telling us.'

Keeping you safe and sound

Cromwood's approach to safeguarding is very much a team effort and tenants have a vital role to play.

On 11 March 2024 Cromwood received a complaint about a violent incident at one of its properties. Because of the way the information was communicated, it was initially treated as a case of antisocial behaviour and the tenant was warned about using abusive language to staff. However, the housing officer had concerns for the tenant's safety, and after looking into the matter in more depth, soon realised that there was a very different story.

The full story was that a few people had turned up looking for Cromwood's tenant. Unable to find him, they damaged the property and assaulted a neighbour. The tenant was the victim, not the perpetrator. This led to a completely different response.

The housing officer logged a multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) referral with the council. A meeting was held just two weeks later attended by a safeguarding officer, police, medical professionals, and support workers. Cromwood was invited to the meeting as we had raised the initial safeguarding concern.

The meeting highlighted several issues that we were unaware of and because of this we changed our practices. Staff no longer visit the property alone and we have a better understanding of the tenant's mental health issues that will assist in future communication.

The plan highlighted the need to:

- Assess the impact on staff, tenants, and all relevant agencies
- Evaluate the risks to visiting professionals
- Review lone working practices and procedures
- Consider the level of risk and decide whether to move the tenant out of the borough
- Take legal advice within the safeguarding team to plan for the victim's family

Our housing officers don't simply carry out property inspections and fix broken boilers. They are trained in safeguarding and can identify issues with tenants and ensure we link in with all relevant agencies to achieve a positive outcome for all.

When we know what's going on, we can ensure that everyone has the information they need to take appropriate action.

The intervention started with the housing officer identifying key risks rather than just dealing with the case as antisocial behaviour. Our experience of housing management and tenant support is invaluable, but we can't do it without you. If you are concerned about your health or safety, please talk to us because the sooner we know, the quicker we can act.

Key contacts



London office:
020 8826 2800



Manchester office:
0161 241 1341



info@cromwood.co.uk



maintenance@cromwood.co.uk



complaints@cromwood.co.uk



rents@cromwood.co.uk

OUT OF HOURS

For emergency help outside normal office hours, contact:

Maintenance emergency (out of hours): 0208 066 5388

Gas (Transco): 0800 111 999



‘It takes the worst to bring out the best and everything we’ve been through has made us stronger.’

KAREN

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