

Talkbac

Winter 2015

Newsletter of Keniston Housing Association

Talking turkey!

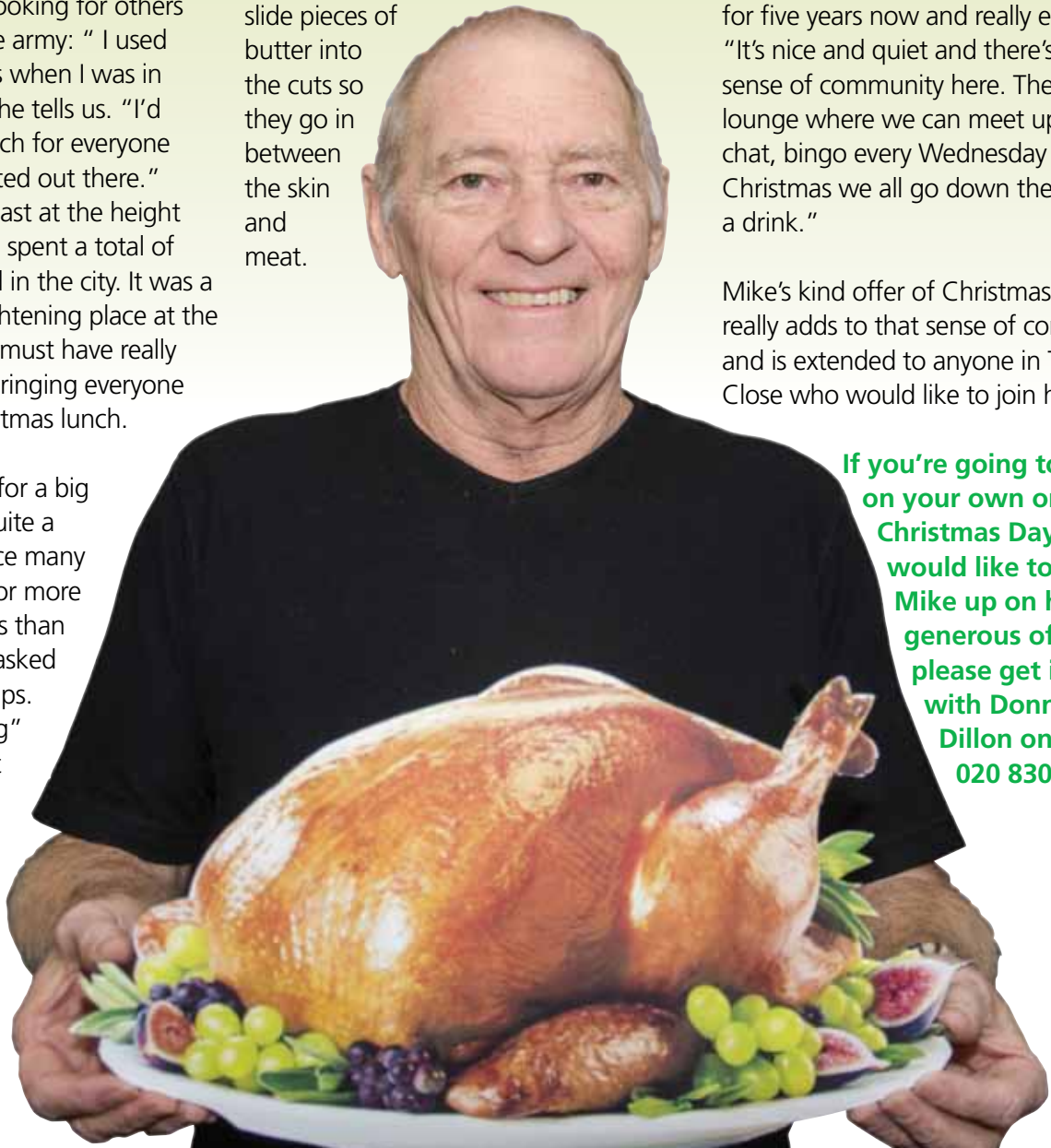
Warm hearted Tarling Close resident Mike Cullen is demonstrating the true spirit of Christmas this year. A keen and experienced cook, he's offered to cook Christmas lunch for anyone on the estate who's going to be alone on Christmas Day. We were so moved by his generosity we spoke to him to find out more.

Mike first started cooking for others when he was in the army: "I used to cook for the lads when I was in Northern Ireland." he tells us. "I'd cook Christmas lunch for everyone while we were posted out there." He was sent to Belfast at the height of the Troubles and spent a total of two years stationed in the city. It was a dangerous and frightening place at the time and the team must have really appreciated Mike bringing everyone together over Christmas lunch.

Of course cooking for a big group like that is quite a challenge, and, since many of us are cooking for more people at Christmas than we're used to, we asked him if he had any tips. "It's all in the timing" he says. "You want to make sure that everything comes to the table hot. There are certain things you can cook and then keep warm for a while, like the

turkey, gravy and stuffing, but the vegetables have to be done at the last minute."

And what about that all important turkey – any tips for getting it right? Mike cooks his turkey upside down so that the juices go into the breast and stop it from drying out, but he says if you'd rather cook it the right way up, you can slice cuts into the skin and slide pieces of butter into the cuts so they go in between the skin and meat.



Because of his job, Mike moved around a lot. He lived all over London and was stationed in Germany as well as Northern Ireland. At the time he played a lot of rugby which kept him fit, but now that he's retired he's taken up gardening instead and enjoys getting out and working in the communal garden at Tarling Close.

Mike has been living at Tarling Close for five years now and really enjoys it. "It's nice and quiet and there's a good sense of community here. There's a lounge where we can meet up for a chat, bingo every Wednesday and at Christmas we all go down the pub for a drink."

Mike's kind offer of Christmas lunch really adds to that sense of community and is extended to anyone in Tarling Close who would like to join him.

If you're going to be on your own on Christmas Day and would like to take Mike up on his generous offer, please get in touch with Donna Dillon on 020 8309 7224.

Learning a beautiful new skill...

For a while now, we've been running some really useful and popular courses at the Darrick Wood Community Centre. They're usually organised in partnership with Bromley Adult Education, but this autumn the Darrick Wood Residents organised, and even funded, one of the courses themselves.



Vivianne Summers explains: "We often have henna painters at resident fun days, and everyone enjoys getting their hands decorated. We discussed it together and thought, if we learn how to do henna painting

ourselves, we'll be learning a new skill... and saving money as well!" As you can see from the photos, the attendees learned how to paint some beautiful designs in henna on each others' hands and they're all really enjoying the course. But it's not just about learning a new skill. As one of the residents said: "I am really enjoying the henna course - it's so good to be out of the house mixing with other people and getting to know them while learning."

...and a really useful one.

As well as henna painting, the group has been hosting computing classes. They've already run an introduction to Microsoft Office and are currently running a course on the basics of being online.

Computer courses are always popular, not least because they come in so useful when you're looking for a job. One of the attendees explains that the course was a useful refresher for her when she started job hunting. "I'm looking to return to work and needed to brush up on my skills, so I feel more confident when applying for jobs that ask for computer skills."

Residents on all the courses have said how much they enjoy the training. As one resident told us: "It's giving me something productive to do with my time and I'm learning new things." The group are now planning their courses for 2016 to include First Aid training and more computing classes. They are also looking at other suggestions from residents, including nail courses and arts & crafts.



If you think the residents in your neighbourhood would like to have something like this in your area, why not get in touch with Community Involvement Officer Lynn Walsh, to see if it might be possible to set some courses up. And if you're a Darrick Wood resident and would like to sign up for a course or find out more, ring Lynn on our usual number and she'll fill you in.

In work, or not. Vital information for everyone!

Whether you are in work or not, everyone needs to be aware of upcoming changes to legislation which will have a major impact on you if you are unfortunate enough to lose your job any time after January.

Everyone has heard about the new Universal Credit coming in soon, but if you are currently in work you may think it doesn't apply to you. However, if you are unfortunate enough to lose your job any time from January onwards and you are single, then it certainly will affect you.

Anyone who is single who loses their job after January 2016 will be assessed for Universal Credit instead of the current Job Seekers Allowance. If this happens to you, it is vital that you claim Universal Credit straight away, because it can take up to seven weeks to assess your claim and, particularly if you are currently paid weekly, you won't be receiving any money during that time.

That means you will have to find the money from savings to pay your rent and all your other household bills while you are waiting. Also, in some

circumstances you may not be entitled to any Universal Credit for the first seven days.

We know how difficult it is to save when money is tight for all of us. But please try to put some money aside as soon as Christmas is over, to keep yourself out of debt if the worst happens. You can also pay a small additional amount to your rent to put your rent account in credit, so that if you are unfortunate enough to lose your job, at least there's one less thing to worry about.

Keeping costs under control this Christmas

Christmas is a very special time but it can also be really stressful because of all the costs involved. The last thing you want is to end up in debt this January, or even worse, to miss paying your rent and get into long term financial trouble. Many people focus so hard on all the things they want – luxury items, gifts for everyone and a cracking meal, and only afterwards ask themselves how they will pay for it. That really is a recipe for being broke.

So this year instead of asking: “what do I want?” Resolve instead to ask: “what can I afford to spend?” Then calculate your available budget and stick to it. Remember, Christmas is just one day - don't ruin the whole of the next year for it. We asked our money saving guru Sharon Johnson to come up with some practical tips for saving money this Christmas – read on for her great ideas!

Just for the kids

If you've got lots of family or friends that you usually buy for, why not talk to them and agree to buy just for the kids this year. Let's face it, money's tight for everyone at the moment, so everyone's bound to appreciate a deal like this! And maybe do a Secret Santa for the adults – where you each buy just one present for one member of the family and have fun trying to guess who your Secret Santa is.

Make the most of the sales

Do you have some family members you won't see until after Christmas Day? Wait until the Boxing Day sales and buy their presents then. It's a bit cheeky, but they'll probably get a better present out of it!

Shop carefully for your fresh food

Don't automatically go for the packaged fruit, veg or Christmas nuts when you're in the supermarket. The loose ones are usually cheaper and, by only buying as much as you need,

you'll be saving money and reducing waste too.

Get paid to shop!

If you prefer to do your Christmas shopping at home, you can actually get cashback on your purchases! Check out cashback websites such as Quidco.com or Topcashback.co.uk. You create an account and then use the site to access high street and online retailers. When you buy your gifts you'll get back a percentage of the value of your shopping and the cashback will be paid directly into your account.

Get ahead of the game

We know that Christmas 2016 hasn't happened yet but if you think further ahead you can save even more next year. Essential festive items such as Christmas cards, wrapping paper and crackers are always in the sales just after Christmas. Be canny and stock up on these items in this year's sales so next year can be even cheaper!

Squash those boxes!

One thing is for sure, even if you cut down on the presents this year, you'll still be left with an enormous amount of wrapping paper, packaging and cardboard boxes.

Together with all the extra bottles and food containers, we all build up an enormous amount of waste to dispose of over the festive season. And since refuse collection is less frequent over Christmas, the result can be a real mess on the pavements and refuse areas.

Overflowing bins are a real problem on our estates during the Christmas period - they're not only unsightly, they can attract rats and other vermin. So please do everything you can to minimize the size of your waste. Crush cardboard boxes and packaging and fold wrapping paper as carefully as possible (make it into a game for the kids – see how small they can make the wrapping paper!) Crush food tins if possible and make sure you wash them out if you're putting them in the recycling bins. Just a bit of extra care and time will ensure our environment is safe and pleasant for everyone.

Darrick Wood has always had an active and vibrant community group, working with Community Involvement Officer Lynn Walsh to put on a wide variety of fun days, training courses, bus trips and other community events. It's a sign of the increasing experience of the group that recently they've started to organise, and pay for, events themselves.

The henna course featured on page two is a case in point, where residents made the decision together to learn a skill they were interested in and organised a course on the subject.

FUN



In the last few months they've also organised and paid for some great social events, including a major fun day in September, which was completely paid for out of the group's own funds that they've raised over the years. And what a day it was! There was glitter tattooing, balloon modelling, a smoothie bike, a disco dome (a big inflatable dome with music to dance and bounce around to inside) and a clown who did face painting. Residents went into full Bake Off mode and baked some truly delicious cakes to raise money. There were lots of competitions too – guess the weight of the cake, guess the number of marbles in the jar and a raffle in aid of Macmillan Cancer Research, with prizes donated by local businesses.



Two animal charities came along and, as always, were an enormous draw. Second Chance animal rescue brought an owl, snakes and tortoises for people to pet and the Dog Trust did a health check on residents' dogs as well as microchipping and cutting toenails (the dogs', not the residents'!)

The local community police came along and joined in the fun too, as did the fire brigade.



&

GAMES



Then for Halloween, the group organised their own party – the first time they've done the whole of the organisation themselves. It was an evening of horror and hilarity, with old fashioned apple bobbing and games like 'decorate the biscuit' and 'wrap the mummy!'

The kids had a great time, as did the adults, and the youth worker who got wrapped up as a mummy was game for a laugh too.

Congratulations to everyone for a series of fantastic events!



The results are in!

We have just had the results of our tenant satisfaction survey back and they're looking good.

Sixty percent of our tenants responded to the survey, which is well above the minimum recommended and more than we've had in recent surveys, so we'd like to say a big 'thank you' to all of you who gave us feedback and comments through the survey.

We thought that the government's programme of austerity measures and welfare reform might depress residents' views of our service, so we're particularly pleased that this year even more of you have said you are happy with the service that Keniston provides. In 2012 93% of those who completed the survey said you were satisfied with Keniston's services overall and this year it has

increased to 95%. This compares very well to other organisations, both large and small, who measure their service in a similar way. Chief Executive Nevil Osborne says: "I'm extremely proud of the staff who are so committed to delivering high quality services and thank them for being able to deliver such an amazing result. The high percentage of satisfaction registered in the survey demonstrates we are fulfilling one of our main strategic aims – to provide excellent services to residents."

We'll be analysing the results in some detail over the next few weeks and using the information we have collected to try to improve even more in the months ahead. And we'll be telling you more about the results and our responses too. Once again, thank you for this big vote of confidence in what we do!

New titles, same great service

At a recent Board meeting, members voted to change some of the titles given to certain staff, including senior managers and receptionists.

Although their jobs have not changed, the new titles better reflect the roles of the people in question.

From now on, the senior managers will be called directors, to acknowledge the size and status of their jobs; so Andrew Shiatis is now Finance Director, Tony Coward is Property Services Director and Vivienne Astall is Housing Services Director. The receptionists are now called Customer Service Officers, which highlights the importance of their role as first point of contact for most people who contact us.

Stephanie joins the team!

What's it like to work at Keniston? Young resident Stephanie Summers has been finding out.

Stephanie is currently doing a BTech Business Level 2 course at her sixth form college and, as part of the course she's doing a three month work placement with us. She's finding it very interesting discovering all about the way we work and the wide variety of jobs people do in Keniston.

In her first week Stephanie met everyone at our Head Office and learned about the various roles of our office based staff. The following week she was out and about in Islington in London and Belvedere in Kent. "It was really interesting seeing



the different estates and talking to the people there" she tells us.

After more visits around our properties, Stephanie is now back in our Head Office and is doing great work on the communications team. "At the moment I'm researching online to find out famous people who live or have lived in Bromley" says Stephanie "and I also look for

events going on in the Borough." She's discovered that singer, songwriter and actress Pixie Lott was born in Bromley, celebrity chef Gary Rhodes lives just five minutes away from our head office and football superstar Rio Ferdinand moved into the area recently!

You can see the results of Stephanie's research on our Facebook page – she's unearthed some fascinating stories and some great pictures.

Stephanie is really enjoying working at Keniston and is writing a blog about her experiences on Tumblr. We're certainly very pleased to have her with us, even if it is just for a short while, and we wish her all the very best in her studies and her future career.

Meet Vivienne Astall

One of those with new titles is Housing Services Director Vivienne Astall. Talkback caught up with her to find out more about what she does and was surprised at the enormous variety of services and people that Vivienne is responsible for!



Vivienne has overall responsibility for all the housing services Keniston provides. That includes lettings, improvements, cleaning and caretaking services, gardens, tenant liaison and community development. But, as she explains: "I don't actually do those jobs myself, I'm responsible for managing the people that do – to make sure everything is running smoothly and successfully and to ensure the staff can be the best they can be in this fast changing world."

Vivienne runs regular team meetings with all the people she manages and gets out and about on all the estates on a regular basis to make sure she keeps in touch with life 'on the ground'. She also attends Board meetings, where she reports on the work of housing services and answers any questions Board members may have about any aspect of her department's work.

One of the areas of responsibility Vivienne is particularly passionate about is the upkeep of the communal areas, such as pathways and gardens. She believes that the outside environment is one of the great pleasures that everyone can enjoy, and making sure that they are clean and well cared

for is one of the things Keniston is rightly known for. She also oversees our Better Homes, Better Neighbourhoods programme, which aims to undertake several small improvements and at least one major improvement to homes and estates every year. A prime example of this programme is the Tarling Close lift we report on in this issue of Talkback (back page).

Vivienne's other great passion is community involvement: "I want everyone to be the best they possibly can, so we try to look for every opportunity to help our tenants develop, whether it's through training courses, working with us on community events, or getting involved in our Residents Panel." Vivienne also oversees all tenant communications, which includes our lively Facebook page (run by Lynne Walsh) and of course Talkback!

But there are some aspects of her job that sound a bit more heavy going. For example she is responsible for making sure all our policies and procedures (things like Anti-Social Behaviour and lettings policies) are up to date and appropriate. With these she walks a fine line between making sure Keniston's policies reflect current legislation without being overly bureaucratic. As she says: "common sense must always prevail."

Finally Vivienne gets out and about beyond Keniston to regular meetings at the National Housing Federation and with local authorities. It's important to her job to keep up to date with what's happening in the wider world of housing and on issues such as welfare reforms; but she also wants to fly the flag for Keniston. As she says: "just because we're small, doesn't mean our voice shouldn't be heard!"

Be aware – you might be responsible!

We're always happy for residents to do some DIY to improve their homes, but if you've made changes to your fixtures and fittings, please do be aware that Keniston might not be responsible for repairing them if something goes wrong.

For example, if you've changed your light fitting to a chandelier, or put in new external lights, any repairs to them will be your responsibility. The sort of fittings we can't be responsible for repairing include taps, showers, external and internal light fittings, electrical switches and power points. In addition, if a fault in something you've added results in a bigger problem (like flooding or major electrical faults) then you will be responsible for the extra work involved in making good everything affected. Please be mindful when reporting repairs and let us know if the fault relates to your own fixtures and fittings, so that we can advise you on how best to proceed with the repair.



You asked, we delivered...

Our sheltered accommodation for elderly people at Tarling Close includes a three storey block which, up until recently had no lift.

This was a problem for residents on the top floor in particular, and meant that people with poor mobility or health problems had previously had to turn down our offers of accommodation on the higher levels. But we've now fitted a brand new special Mobility lift and we're really pleased to hear it's had

a huge impact on residents' lives. For example one lady is frightened of traditional lifts, because they are enclosed, but because the new one is made of glass she doesn't feel claustrophobic. She now doesn't need to use the stairs and can get large amounts of shopping in her trolley without having to ask for assistance. Mrs Christine Hulbert feels the same: "it's changed my life" she says. "I no longer have to wait for my family to come over to bring my shopping upstairs for me. It means I can be far more independent."

That extra independence has made a big difference in many ways – for example it means that residents on the top floor have been able to join in the social events more often, because they can get up and down so much more easily. We're really pleased we've been able to install the lift and that it's made such a difference – improving people's homes and their lives is exactly what Keniston's Better Homes Better Neighbourhoods fund is all about.

Help road test our new website

As we mentioned in the previous issue of Talkback, we're in the process of changing our website to make it more useful and interactive for everyone. We're very pleased to tell you that we've now engaged specialist website consultants Reason Digital to completely rework the website over the next few months. It will have a complete facelift and will work far better on tablets and mobile phones than the current one. We're also working towards giving tenants online access to their rent account and repair history, although that may be phased in slightly later.

We're excited about the project as it will give us a chance to tell the world who we are and what we do in a far more modern and interactive way. And we'd like to ask for your help in making sure it's the best it possibly can be. To ensure it's easy to use and works well, we would love some residents to do some user testing during the redesign process and give us their feedback. If you are interested please contact Lynn Walsh, Community Involvement Officer by email at LynnWalsh@kenistonha.co.uk or via our usual phone number.

Christmas opening hours
Thurs 24th. Christmas Eve - open from 9am-2pm
Friday 25th. Christmas Day - closed
Monday 28th. Bank holiday - closed
Tuesday 29th to Thursday 31st - open from 9am-5pm
Friday 1st Jan. New Year's Day - closed
Have a wonderful Christmas everyone and a very happy New Year!



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