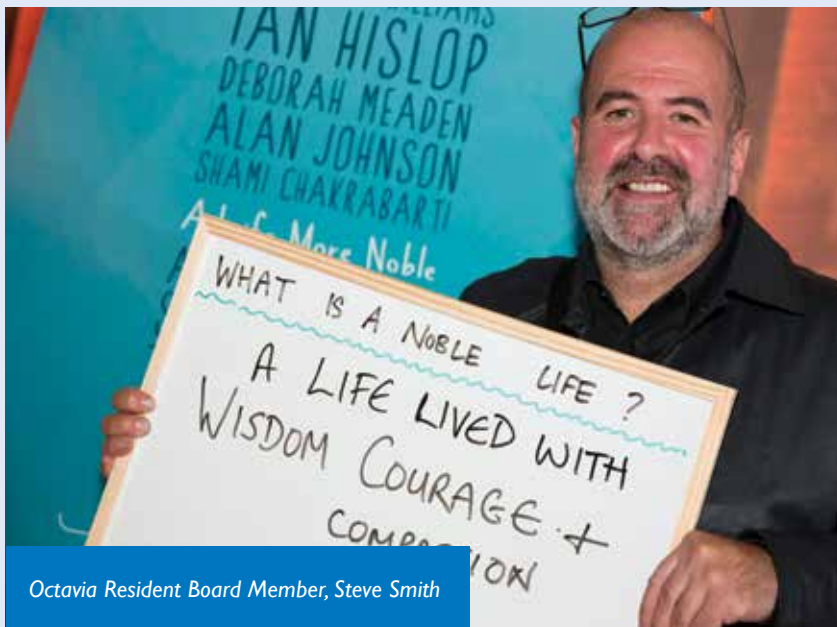


EDITION 23: WINTER 2016 - Simple, up-to-date, important news for Octavia residents

UPDATE NEWSLETTER

GET A COPY OF A LIFE MORE NOBLE



At the time of writing, two months after we published the book, we have sold nearly 700 copies, raising nearly £3,700 for the Octavia Foundation. We want to give all our residents a free copy (one per household) – if you haven't got your copy yet, call 020 8354 5500 and ask to speak to the Communications team or visit Emily House. And if you're looking for present ideas, the book is only £9.99 – it's a brilliant way of supporting the Octavia Foundation, while discovering how Octavia Hill still inspires us today.



2015 marked 150 years since our founder Octavia Hill acquired her first property. To celebrate the anniversary and her far reaching legacy we published a new book, *A Life More Noble*.

A Life More Noble gathers reflections from residents, staff members and high-profile contributors including Tamsin Greig, Ian Hislop, Alan Johnson MP, Deborah Meaden and Dr Rowan Williams to explore whether Octavia's original mission – to make 'individual life noble, homes happy and family life good' – is still relevant 150 years on.

The book received lots of media attention, including pieces in *The Independent*, *The Telegraph* and *The Big Issue* magazine. It also featured on the Robert Elms Show on BBC London radio; and Marylebone resident Eileen Crawford spoke on a BBC World Service feature exploring Octavia Hill's legacy.

Benefits update

We will continue to keep you updated on benefits changes. The latest updates are:

Universal Credit for new single person claimants has now been rolled out to most of the boroughs in which Octavia operates. Please let us know if you start to claim this benefit so we can provide any necessary support and advice.

What do you think of this newsletter?

Let us know at: E_update@octavia.org.uk

Contact us

Repairs:

T 0800 479 0011 (freephone)

Customer Services:

T 020 8354 5500 E info@octavia.org.uk

W www.octaviahousing.org.uk

The Benefit Cap is a limit on the total amount of certain benefits you can get if you are of working-age. The Benefit Cap will only affect you if you're getting Housing Benefit or Universal Credit.

The cap is currently £500 per week for families and £350 per week for single people. There are now plans to lower this cap to £442 per week for families, but no start date has been given yet. If you think you might be affected, you need to give some thought as to how you will manage this change. We can also provide help and support on household budgeting and if you need assistance please contact your Income Officer.

If you are affected by the **Bedroom Tax** you need to give thought to your long-term plans. If you are in your 40s or 50s, for example, then you potentially face 15–25 years of reduced housing benefit payments until you reach pension age.

We can help you to downsize to a smaller property and we

currently have an incentive scheme where we pay you £3,000 for each bedroom you give up when downsizing. For further information, please contact our Lettings team on [020 8354 5640](tel:02083545640).

You can also apply to your local authority for a **Discretionary Housing Payment** to cover the shortfall caused by the reduced level of housing benefit due to either the Benefit Cap or the Bedroom Tax. These awards are 'discretionary' as the name suggests so cannot be appealed against and are time limited. Local authorities will be looking to see that you have made long-term plans to no longer rely on the Discretionary Housing Payment award. We can also provide help and support in applying for Discretionary Housing Payments and if you need assistance please contact your Income Officer.

For working-age people there will be a **Benefits freeze** for four years from April 2016. Ordinarily, welfare benefits increase each financial

year to reflect the rising cost of living, but this will not be the case for four years. This will affect Job Seeker's Allowance, Employment and Support Allowance, some types of Housing Benefit, and Child Benefit. Please note that Pensions, Maternity Pay and disability benefits are excluded.

From April 2016, the family premium in **Housing Benefit** will be removed for new claims and new births meaning a reduction in weekly Housing Benefit. From April 2016 the period over which a Housing Benefit claim can be backdated will reduce from six months to just four weeks.

Following the Government's Autumn Statement there will now be no changes to **Tax Credits**.

Please contact your Income Officer if you need any advice or support on benefit issues. We are here to help where we can.

BE INVOLVED

Contact Anna de Souza, Resident Involvement Manager:
[020 8354 5674](tel:02083545674) or anna.desouza@octavia.org.uk or visit our website.



Your priorities are our priorities

At this year's Your Space event in June residents voted for their top priorities for service improvements. These priorities are:

- ▶ Repairs – getting it right first time
- ▶ Developing the new Resident Involvement Strategy
- ▶ Improving service charge setting processes
- ▶ Adaptations – helping residents retain their independence
- ▶ Keeping rent increases down.

We are working to improve in all these areas and here's what we have done to date:

Repairs

The majority of the repair jobs we do in your home can be completed in one visit however some jobs may need a number of visits if, for example, parts have to be ordered.

We are working to improve the quality of the information given to you when you report a repair so that you are clear how long it will take. We will



Residents at Your Space

also keep you updated about any delays.

We are also improving the way we monitor progress on jobs that can be completed in one visit to ensure that this happens in practice.

Resident Involvement

We have a new resident involvement strategy which has been approved by the Tenant Steering Group (TSG) and the

Board of Octavia. There are lots of different ways to get involved and we are also going to experiment by making better use of digital technology to make connections with residents. Residents have told us they want to be involved in the area of repairs and also meet their neighbours. As well as holding our annual resident fun day, (Your Space) we will also be arranging a number of local, informal events at a variety of schemes.

Service Charges

We have been consulting with tenants and leaseholders and have improved the way we provide information on service charges. We have also installed new software which will improve the consistency and accuracy of service charge calculations.

Adaptations

Our adaptations service continues to help increasing numbers of elderly and vulnerable tenants to stay in their own homes and retain their independence. We are reviewing the process to see if adaptations can be completed more quickly so that we can increase satisfaction even further from the current level of 95%.

Rents

Octavia, like other Housing Associations, increase rents in accordance with a formula set by the Government. In previous years, increases have been linked to the Consumer Price Index [CPI] for September of the previous year; however, from April 2016 and for the next four years, rents will be decreased by 1% each year. The Government has said that it is considering a separate scheme to apply from 2017 that could mean residents on higher incomes will pay more. At this stage the detail of the various schemes has not been announced but when it is we will let you know.

Tenant steering group - looking for new members

The Tenant Steering Group held their AGM in November which was attended by a group of residents. The key issues included:

- ▶ Communication with Octavia staff
- ▶ Repairs (internal and external)
- ▶ Ongoing maintenance of homes
- ▶ Anti-social behaviour
- ▶ Estate services concerns
- ▶ Aids and adaptations
- ▶ Complaints being dealt with effectively

The TSG will now be discussing these areas of Octavia services in 2016 and will plan how they can work with Octavia to help them deliver an even better service. The Tenant Steering Group are looking for new members and a nomination form is included with this newsletter. Please do complete and return the form to Octavia by Friday 26 February 2016 if you would like to nominate yourself as a new TSG member to help improve services for residents.



Residents at the Annual General Meeting

Understanding more about hoarding



Hoarding can be a challenge for landlords like Octavia and our residents. In extreme cases, hoarding can be a safety hazard, cause harm and inconvenience to others, and even cause damage to the structure of the building where the hoarding is taking place. Severe hoarding can be a sign of a bigger problem. It can often only be solved by a sensitive, supportive, and long-term approach.

We aim to deal with severe hoarding by working with residents and providing them with access to support.

Signs of hoarding usually include: the collection of items that appear to be of little use or value; rooms cluttered to such an extent that they can no longer be used properly; and a negative impact on the quality of life of the resident or their family.

Four facts about severe hoarding:

1. Severe hoarding can be an indicator of other problems: mobility issues, dementia, learning disabilities, and mental health problems (such as depression and anxiety) can all play a role in hoarding.
2. Hoarding can be about emotions and feelings: the items hoarded are often not important in themselves; a person's feelings about the items are what matters.
3. Severe hoarding is similar to other behaviours that people find difficult to control: severe hoarding is a behaviour which can be

changed by personal commitment and appropriate assistance and support.

4. 'Collecting' is different to 'hoarding': collectors, unlike hoarders, tend to be positive about the items they collect, for example, by keeping them well organised and showing them to people.

For more information, please visit our website and download our new factsheet about hoarding which also includes links to sources of support.



Soaring energy prices mean that 1 in 5 households are struggling to heat their homes. The average energy bill is now at £1,400, leaving 5 million homes currently in debt to their energy supplier and living in fuel poverty.

The National Housing Federation offer a free, impartial, switching service specifically set up for social housing tenants called My Home Energy Switch. The service helps you to switch to the cheapest possible provider and fix your energy tariffs to protect yourself against future price increases. Visit <http://nhf.think-switch.co.uk> or if you prefer to speak to someone over the phone, you can call them free on 0800 001 4706. If you have any concerns regarding your immersion heater, then please call our Customer Services on 020 8354 5500.

Tackling tenancy fraud



We are continuing to work closely with local authority fraud teams to ensure that we recover properties that are either unlawfully occupied or are no longer being occupied by a tenant as their main home.

Recently, we were successful in a court action we had taken against one tenant, whose case we referred to the Fraud Team at Brent Council approximately two years ago.

Brent Council's Fraud Investigation team were able to uncover that the tenant had relocated abroad to a European country and was also the owner of two other residential properties in the UK. Despite the evidence, the tenant chose to challenge the evidence and defend his case in court. This led to a long court process due to delays caused by the former tenant and his legal representatives. However, as Octavia are committed to ensuring our properties are occupied by those who genuinely need accommodation, we continued with the court action.

We regained possession of the property and large legal costs were awarded against the tenant. There are different types of housing fraud, here are some of the most common ones:

- ▶ Unlawful subletting – is where a tenant lets out the whole of their council or housing association home without the knowledge or permission of their landlord. They often continue to pay the rent for the property directly to their landlord but charge the person they are subletting to at a much higher rate. It is unlawful and unfair to sublet and to profit from a property which could be given to someone legally entitled to occupy it.
- ▶ Obtaining housing by deception – is where a person gets a council or housing association home by giving false information in their application. For example, not telling the landlord they are renting another council or housing association property or giving false information about who lives with them.
- ▶ Wrongly claimed succession – is where a tenant dies and someone who is not entitled to tries to take over or succeed the tenancy. For example, they might say they lived with the tenant before they died, when in fact they were living elsewhere.
- ▶ Key selling – is where a tenant is paid to pass on their keys in return for a one-off payment.

If you suspect someone is committing tenancy fraud, or is no longer living at their Octavia property as their main home, you can contact our Tenancy Fraud Hotline on [020 8354 5575](tel:02083545575).

All information received will be taken seriously and treated in the strictest confidence.

Improve your shared areas



Each year, we put money aside to improve the shared areas at some of our schemes and developments. We use this to carry out works that go beyond our normal responsibilities as your landlord. As part of this scheme, residents are also able to apply for grants for improvements. We recently worked with residents at our Bourbon Lane Estate following incidents of nuisance behaviour from other members of the public and were able to carry out the following improvements:

- ▶ changes to the bin storage area to stop fly-tipping and rubbish dumping,
- ▶ installing fencing to deter loiterers,
- ▶ installation of additional CCTV cameras; and
- ▶ planting of new shrubbery in the courtyard.

We welcome ideas for improvements throughout the year, so if you have any ideas for improving the shared areas where you live, then do let us know. Our Communal Services and Improvements Officers will be able to advise you as to whether your idea is a viable one, and whether other factors will need to be taken into account such as planning permission requirements, or whether there will be implications on service charges. They will also be able to advise you on how you and your neighbours may be able to apply for a grant to get works carried out. You can contact your Communal Services and Improvements Officer on [020 8354 5500](tel:02083545500).

Help counselling centre

HELP is a local service, it provides skilled, compassionate, 1-1 low-cost counselling support, annually offering 5500 sessions to the local community within central London. For 40 years HELP has been changing the world, one life at a time.

- ▶ HELP addresses the need for mental health services in the local community.
- ▶ 1 in 4 adults experience mental health problems (Mental Health Foundation 2012). That means approximately 45,000 adults in RBKC alone are suffering in this way. This in turn affects family life, relationships, and life in the workplace.
- ▶ HELP gives people the support they need to transform life crises and challenges into opportunities for personal development and creative change.

For more information visit www.HELPcounselling.com

Changes to our neighbourhood team



We are reshaping our neighbourhood services to give a greater focus on Anti-Social Behaviour. By March 2016, we are hoping to have in place two Investigation Officers who will be responsible for investigating ASB complaints and Tenancy Fraud. The aim is to provide a more responsive service to cases of anti-social behaviour and to help us tackle tenancy fraud. As a result of this change we are changing the title of your Neighbourhood Officer to Resident Services Officer. We are also planning some further changes in how we deliver our services and will keep you informed of developments.

Our performance

We closely monitor performance in all areas of our work in order to improve. A summary of how we are doing in key areas is below. We are doing well in a number of areas, and will be looking to improve on how quickly we let void properties.

Performance indicator	November 2015	Target	Rating
Rent arrears as % rent due (general needs)	5.27%	4.8%	☹️
Rent collection as % of rent due (general needs)	99.61%	100.1%	☹️
Standard voids – average re-let time in days (year to date)	24	20	☹️
% of emergency repairs completed within target time	100%	99%	😊
% of urgent repairs completed within target time	98%	98%	😊
% of routine repairs completed within target time	96%	98%	☹️
% responses to anti-social behaviour reports within target time	100%	95%	😊
Average speed of phone calls pick up in seconds (switchboard)	5	14	😊
Average speed of phone calls pick up in seconds (repairs line)	17	14	☹️
% responses to complaints within target time	100%	99%	😊
Satisfaction with Octavia's overall service (from completed repairs survey)	94%	95%	☹️



Diary 2016

Date in your diary

Our 2016 diary is now available on request. Please email: update@octavia.org.uk or call 020 8354 5665 to get your copy. They go fast so contact us soon.

Enter our quarterly direct debit prize draw and you could win £250 (applies to new direct debit setups and paid within the first 3 months) If you keep a clear rent account by the end of March 2016 you will be directly entered into the draw for a £1000 prize.

Please contact us if you need any part of this information in Braille, on audio tape or explained in a different language.

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বাংলা Français Português Shqip فارسی

