

Community Together: College Bank and Lower Falinge newsletter (text only version). Spring 2020 edition.

A MESSAGE FROM GARETH SWARBRICK, RBH CHIEF EXECUTIVE

Welcome to another edition of Community Together – our dedicated newsletter for residents of College Bank and Lower Falinge.

Spring is normally a time of new hope and excitement across the borough. This year, however, I know that many of you will be preoccupied and concerned by the impact of Covid-19 in the UK and indeed around the world. I want to reassure you that we are doing everything in our power to maintain our most urgent and critical services at this challenging time. We are continuing to monitor the Government's guidance on a daily basis and you can access up-to-date information on our website at rbh.org.uk/coronavirus.

We have made a firm commitment to keep everyone in College Bank and Lower Falinge regularly updated on progress with our proposals for the town centre area. After careful consideration and having taken extra precautions with distribution, we are pleased to provide this latest update.

Michelle and Syed from our regen team are still on hand to answer your questions via email and telephone. Recently, we've been asked for specific information via social media, so we have answered the most frequently asked questions on pages 6 & 7.

We know at this time people are unable to move home. However, over the longer term we remain committed to finding the right homes for everyone affected by our proposals. Our promise that anyone who needs to move and wants to stay in the town centre will be able to do so is still in place.

In this edition, you'll find some feedback from residents about their experience of moving home.

With the support of the local community, our Residents Deal has taken a big step forward this year, while our New Pioneers programme - delivered in partnership with Rochdale Borough Council - has seen some real successes.

We've provided some clear information about how we're adapting in response to Covid-19. I would like to stress that if you have any concerns about how you might be affected, you should get in touch with our team as soon as possible.

If there's anything you'd like us to include in future newsletters, or if you'd like to receive it in any other language or format, we'd be more than happy to help.

We would like wish everyone in our College Bank and Lower Falinge communities good health in these uncertain times. If we can support you in any way, please let us know.

Gareth Swarbrick, Chief Executive, Rochdale Boroughwide Housing

REHOUSING UPDATE

As part of our long term plans, we remain committed to finding the right home for everyone who will need to move from College Bank and Lower Falinge.

Any residents who have asked to remain in Rochdale town centre have been supported to do so; while others have chosen to move further afield, for example to be nearer to family or friends.

Feedback from resident moved within Town Centre Boundary

“Because I’m 80, I moved from the top floor of a tower block to the ground floor, which is great when I park my electric scooter for charging!”

“My new flat is well decorated; has easier access and I know my neighbours. They all moved over too, which has made settling in much easier.

“This block is much more sociable as we have a weekly dinner in the communal lounge, this is a good way to catch up with everyone.”

Feedback from resident moved up to one mile from Town Centre Boundary

“I relocated from Mitchell Hey last June and moved from a flat to a bungalow. I’m happier here as I’m close to my son and my friend lives locally.

“My new home is compact and convenient, it’s warm and comfortable and easier to clean. My old flat was really spread out. Now I have views of the green and a small garden at the back, which is great in the summer.”

Feedback from resident moved up to two miles from Town Centre Boundary

“I never thought I would settle down anywhere but Mitchell Hey. But I don’t want to be anywhere else now – I love it here!

“Michelle, thank you so much for helping me find my forever home. It’s lovely here, it’s just waiting for someone to love it, like it has been before.”

Feedback from resident moved up to two miles from Town Centre Boundary

“I’ve moved into a much better one-bedroom property in Wardle which I’m proud to call home.”

“I was offered an upgrade and saw the move as a fresh start. My flat is everything I requested from Michelle – it has a garden, a bath, is spacious and is on the first floor.”

RESIDENTS’ DEAL – UPDATE

At the end of February, RBH and tenant representatives from College Bank and Lower Falinge signed off RBH’s commitments as part of our Residents’ Deal. The commitments outline what residents can expect from RBH as we work together with the local community to deliver our regeneration plans.

A big thank you to all the local residents who worked with us to create these commitments. 138 local people responded to our digital survey, in addition to 35 face-to-face conversations. We also worked with two local groups of tenants to review the survey results and with a group of six residents to create the recommendations.

OUR COMMITMENTS

1. RBH tenants and homeowners losing their home will receive compensation in the form of home loss and disturbance payments
2. RBH will continue to provide high quality management and maintenance of existing homes during the regeneration
3. New homes will be built to very high environmental standards, so they are cheaper to run
4. Residents who need it will receive support throughout the regeneration process
5. All residents will be given no less than one year's notice to make arrangements should they need to move
6. RBH tenants will be entitled to a home of the same type with the same number of bedrooms
7. All residents who want to live in the town centre will be able to do so

RBH have also adopted the following commitments, following recommendations from an independent report, commissioned about the residents' deal:

8. RBH will ensure there is enough affordable housing for those who need to move
9. RBH will work with Rochdale Council to support the tenants of College Bank and Lower Falinge to have priority for rehousing under the Housing Allocations Policy and look to develop a Local Lettings Policy for these neighbourhoods
10. RBH will keep residents regularly updated on progress and publish and update a timeline for the development of the Town Centre
11. RBH will ensure that new and refurbished homes have the best possible broadband provision
12. RBH will give tenants the opportunity to be involved in the planning and delivery of future service management
13. RBH will continue to engage residents in the future phases of design of the town centre plans, including the design of new homes and investment in existing homes
14. RBH will use a range of engagement methods which encourage and enable all residents to contribute
15. RBH will work with residents to establish their priorities for community asset building activity in the neighbourhood including supporting independent advice for the community

16. Tenants who want to live next to existing neighbours can ask to be rehoused together.

The remaining RBH commitments relate to owners only:

- Private tenants can ask for help with finding a new home
- If RBH has negotiated and agreed an offer, they will buy privately owned homes for market value +10% for owner occupiers and market value +7.5% for landlords based on independent valuation

YOUR QUESTIONS ANSWERED (FAQS)

We are always keen to hear your feedback about this newsletter and answer any questions about our plans for the future of College Bank and Lower Falinge.

You can always get in touch with our dedicated team by emailing towncentre.regen@rbh.org.uk or by calling our freephone number on 01706 274100 / 0800 027 7769 (use option 7).

We have received a number of enquires via social media and would like to take this opportunity to answer some of the most frequently asked questions.

We have pulled together a more complete list of questions and answers for you at collegebankandlowerfalinge.org.uk/faqs/

Why are you leaving homes empty when I have heard there is high demand for housing in Rochdale?

As most people will be aware, in order to provide the right mix of homes for current and future generations, we have taken the difficult decision to demolish some homes in the area to make way for a better mix of more modern and better-quality homes. Some of those numbers on the waiting list are people wanting to move from College Bank and Lower Falinge to a more suitable home.

For College Bank, a key part of this decision is because the cost of bringing our high-rise flats up to a high living standard will be unaffordable – in some cases more than £15m per block – and the existing apartments are not suitable for local families with children, who urgently need housing.

We have already found suitable new homes for more than half the residents in Mitchell Hey – the first tower block in College Bank that we have been focusing on.

Until all residents have been supported into new homes, either in the town centre or other areas if they choose, some properties will remain empty.

We are not able to move people back into blocks that have been earmarked for demolition as these flats would no longer provide the quality and security that we want to offer in all our homes.

Are you carrying out repairs to homes in Lower Falinge and College Bank?

We are continuing to carry out the same day-to-day repairs for homes in College Bank and Lower Falinge as across the rest of our RBH homes. Similarly, our Neighbourhood

Housing, Caretaking and Community Partnership teams continue to provide services in these areas.

Work affecting whole blocks, such as window or heating system replacements, is currently on hold while we work up further detail for the blocks we will be refurbishing.

If you need to report a repair, please visit rbh.org.uk/report-a-repair as usual.

How are you meeting your promise to provide homes in the town centre for those who want to stay in the town centre?

We have made a firm and public commitment that any residents affected by our proposals who wish to remain within the town centre will be able to do so; in a like-for-like home and under the same tenancy conditions. We made this commitment after knocking on every door and speaking to people about where they would like to live in future.

After those conversations we knew that not everyone wanted a home in the town centre. We have been keeping this promise to all residents who have engaged with us so far and we will continue to do so.

When we have a full understanding of a resident's needs, we can quickly match them to a suitable property, and where there are special requirements we will do a direct match to a new home.

I've heard you are reducing the total number of homes in central Rochdale, is this true?

We are not reducing the total number of homes in Rochdale, far from it. We are confident that our developing plans will result in more homes of all types within Rochdale's town centre area.

For example, the Lower Falinge and College Bank masterplan area includes sites which are currently vacant where new homes would be built. Our plans would also support investment into new homes across the whole town centre area.

Are you forcing people to move out of the area?

We have developed our proposals in consultation with the local community, to make sure that we can continue to provide the right kinds of homes for everyone in future. We have been very clear from the outset that our proposals are designed to benefit existing residents as much as people wanting to move into the area.

As we have explained above, anyone who wants to stay in the town centre area will be supported to do so. Anyone who would prefer to move to a different area will equally be supported.

What do you mean by the 'town centre area'?

The map at <https://www.collegebankandlowerfalinge.org.uk/2019/town-centre-map/> shows the area covered by our town centre rehousing promise – all within a short walk from College Bank and Lower Falinge.

We look forward to broadening the supply of homes across Rochdale as we continue building new homes in College Bank and Lower Falinge over the coming years.

NEW PIONEERS

Our partnership programme with Rochdale Borough Council, New Pioneers, is continuing to deliver on its goals of improving life opportunities for people living in College Bank and Lower Falinge.

Since its official launch in September 2019, careers broker Daisy Silva has enlisted and supported 14 New Pioneers to make positive life choices and move forward with their career journeys.

After exceeding all targets over an initial six-month period, we're delighted to announce that New Pioneers has been extended to run until February 2021 at the earliest.

If you're looking for help finding work or practical advice for any aspect of life, Daisy would love to hear from you.

Many of the New Pioneers have already learned or qualified with new skills, found extra confidence and even renewed purpose in their lives. Joining New Pioneers is easy and doesn't affect any financial support you may be receiving, like Employment & Support Allowance or Carer's Allowance.

All New Pioneers will now be asked to make pledges as part of their 12-month commitment. We know that we will need to find different ways of working with Pioneers in the current health emergency, but we are committed to doing this and continuing to offer support.

If you're prepared to take responsibility for your future, be open and ambitious in your goals and actively contribute to group activities – New Pioneers could provide your logical next step.

Lensa Birhanu is one of the New Pioneers currently working with Daisy.

"I've been out of education since 2015, bringing up four children on my own. My son has been struggling at school recently and it had definitely been getting me down. Having not being in education for such a long time, I felt hopeless - like I had no future and I had no idea where to turn for help.

"I found out about New Pioneers on a visit to a local Children's Centre. One of the staff there knew that I was struggling and recommended that I speak to Daisy Silva from New Pioneers.

"Daisy quickly made me feel a lot more positive about things. She is such a wonderful person and really sees the best in people. We soon started talking about what I could do to start feeling better and practical steps to help me move forward with my life and career.

"Through New Pioneers, I've been connected with another member who has really helped me to improve my Maths ability. I've also completed my Mental Health Level 1 training and Daisy has also arranged some volunteering that will help me achieve NVQ level 2 in Health and Social care, something I have always wanted to do.

"Daisy has also helped with more practical things – like giving me confidence - and together with my driving instructor, encouraged me to take my driving test again. After failing twice, I thought I would never get my license. Thanks to the encouragement I've

received through New Pioneers and my driving instructor, I recently passed my practical test. I'm so happy and excited about what this will mean for my family in the future.

"I would really recommend that everyone gets in touch with Daisy. New Pioneers has helped me in so many ways – not just with getting into work. I've been able to take part in some really fun and interesting social activities, like the New Pioneers choir and even a new knitting group.

"Meeting Daisy has been such a wonderful experience; she has been so encouraging every step of the way. I feel better about my career, but also in my personal life. For the first time in a long time, I am excited about the future for me and my children."

CORONAVIRUS UPDATE

As we progress our regeneration proposals with the community in College Bank and Lower Falinge, our absolute top priority at all times remains the health and safety of our residents and members.

In these exceptional circumstances brought on by the Coronavirus outbreak, we ask all our residents to take extra care and follow the latest advice from the Government, NHS and Public Health England.

Due to the current restrictions placed on every household in the UK, we recognise that it would be extremely challenging and ill-advised to continue with discussions or arrange meetings to support our residents in moving home.

That's why we have now suspended all new lettings, other than in exceptional circumstances. We understand that this will inevitably delay some planned moves from our existing blocks.

If you have already been offered a new home, don't worry. Your offer is unaffected by the temporary suspension and the Homechoice team will arrange your viewing and sign up as soon as they are able to.

Our repairs service remains the same in the town centre homes as all our other homes. This service is affected by current circumstances and at the time of going to press is emergency repairs only. More information can be found at rbh.org.uk/coronavirus.

If you have any questions or concerns about the progress of your move, please speak to a member of our team by calling our dedicated Freephone number 0800 027 7769 (use option 7), or by emailing towncentre.regen@rbh.org.uk

For more information on our response to the coronavirus outbreak, please visit our website at rbh.org.uk/coronavirus

CHANGES IN YOUR AREA

To protect the health and safety of our tenants and employees, we are currently delivering our services differently:

- Our customer centre at St Alban's House is closed, but you can still contact us by telephone on Freephone 0800 027 7769. You can also visit our website at www.rbh.org.uk, and e-mail us on customerexperience@rbh.org.uk.
- We are currently only undertaking emergency repairs and essential gas safety checks.
- Our teams are doing everything they can to support vulnerable residents in our communities. They have made hundreds of telephone calls to ask residents if they need any help or support, and are continuing to do so across our communities.
- Our grounds maintenance service is suspended until further notice and we have asked our teams to carry out additional cleaning in communal areas to keep these areas as safe and hygienic as we can.

We know that many residents will be worried about their finances at this difficult time. If this applies to you, please get in touch with us on Freephone 0800 027 7769 or incomeaccounts@rbh.org.uk.

We have a team of experienced advisors ready to discuss your situation – the sooner you call, the quicker they will be able to advise you. If you are sick, caring for others, or cannot work for another reason due to coronavirus, we can discuss how we might be able to help you through this difficult time.

We are very proud of how those who live and work in Rochdale Borough have pulled together to help keep our communities safe and healthy – thank you! We are continuing to work closely with Rochdale Council and other partners to provide our communities with the support that they need.

Rochdale Council have provided their own information and advice for borough residents, which you can view on their website at www.rochdale.gov.uk/coronavirus

STOP PRESS – NEXT PHASE OF NEWBUILD DEVELOPMENT TO START IN FALINGE

We are now delighted to announce that we have a partner – Engie construction – to take forward the next phase of new development in Lower Falinge.

Despite the current difficulty affecting the construction industry, the teams at Engie and RBH have worked tirelessly to be in a position to commit to delivery of the next phase of 55 new homes. This has also enabled us to secure £2.53m grant from Homes England – much needed additional investment for our town centre plans. These 55 new homes will all be for affordable rent and this is capped at the local housing allowance as a benchmark to ensure they remain affordable for all.

More details will follow in the next newsletter.

YOUR NEWS AND VIEWS

We're always keen for College Bank and Lower Falinge residents to send us their news, events and suggestions to help us shape this community newsletter's future.

If you have any ideas for a better way to receive updates - through the post, by email, or in some other way – please let us know and we'll enter you into a free draw for a fantastic prize.

Please do contact us at towncentre.regen@rbh.org.uk with any ideas for our next editions.

CHANGES TO DROP IN SERVICE

Our top priority during the coronavirus outbreak is the health and safety of our tenants and employees. For this reason, we have reluctantly decided to cancel our drop-in sessions at College Bank and Lower Falinge until further notice.

We are sorry for any inconvenience and thank you for your patience and understanding. You can still contact our team by e-mail on towncentre.regen@rbh.org.uk or by phone on Freephone 0800 027 7769 (use option 7).