



OPEN HOUSE

The newsletter for Croydon Council tenants and leaseholders

WINTER 2022

CELEBRATING A CROYDON RESIDENTS' 109 AMAZING YEARS



Our first edition of Open House in 2022 dedicates its front page to one of Croydon's oldest residents, Ms Merah-Louise Smith, who celebrated her 109th birthday on 9 November 2021.

Stanley Enyinnaya, an operational manager in our tenancy and caretaking service, and Councillor Patricia Hay-Justice, Cabinet Member for Homes, were invited to celebrate her birthday at her home with family and friends. Stanley said, *"It was an honour and privilege to share this very special occasion with Merah-Louise, her family and friends. We presented her a box of chocolates, a card and flowers to celebrate this special day. She is truly an inspiration"*.

We wanted to find out more about Merah-Louise, whose age places her as one of if not the oldest resident in the whole of Croydon. We asked her son Tony to tell us more about her fascinating story. **(Continued on page three).**



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A BELATED HAPPY NEW YEAR AND A WARM WELCOME TO THE FIRST EDITION OF OPEN HOUSE IN 2022.

I wanted to start by making you aware of the Household Support Fund (HSF) grant that's available to help those most in need this winter. It's a one off cash grant which can be used to buy food, gas or electricity top-ups and other essentials items. There's support specifically for vulnerable households in emergency or temporary accommodation, council homes, those who are at risk of homelessness, and rough sleepers over the winter. The grant is available until 31 March 2022. Turn to page twelve for more information about the scheme.

In November, I was invited to celebrate the 109th birthday of Ms Merah-Louise Smith. She came to live in the UK from Jamaica in 1963 and settled in Croydon. Croydon was the first local authority in the country to establish and celebrate an annual Windrush Day in recognition of the rich diversity Commonwealth citizens have brought to the borough and I felt privileged and proud to meet this incredible lady from Croydon's Windrush community. I hope you enjoy her story as much as I did.

Our new Housing Improvement Board, set up to support improvements to our housing services, has started its work, with some fantastic residents now having been appointed. You can find out about them and how we are working with them to improve things for our residents on page eight and nine.

Over the past few months, we have spoken to almost 700 residents about their experience of our housing services. Thank you to all those residents that spoke with our officers and you can read for what residents told us on page 7. We are now looking closely your feedback and most importantly how we can turn it into practical improvements to the housing services we deliver. We will be speaking to more residents across the borough over the coming months - if you would like our resident involvement team to visit your block or estate, please contact residentinvolvement@croydon.gov.uk.

Like many other London boroughs, Croydon has a severe problem of demand for properties outweighing supply. We are always looking at ways of reducing overcrowding, and one of these is a cash incentive for tenants who no longer need a larger council home. This creates homes for families in need and at the time of writing has happened 133 times since April 2019 with others in the pipeline. Tenants receive 2k for each room they downsize. Contact Mari-Ann.Page@croydon.gov.uk or HSG-ALLOCATIONS@croydon.gov.uk if you'd like to find out more.

Considering selling your home? We're always interested to hear from leaseholders who bought their properties from us and are now considering selling. We are also looking to buy larger non ex-council properties to add to our social housing stock - a quick and simple chain-free process. We may also have the first right of refusal for your property (under the Right to Buy legislation) if you do sell. Please contact the estates team at estates.assets@croydon.gov.uk if you're interested or for more details.

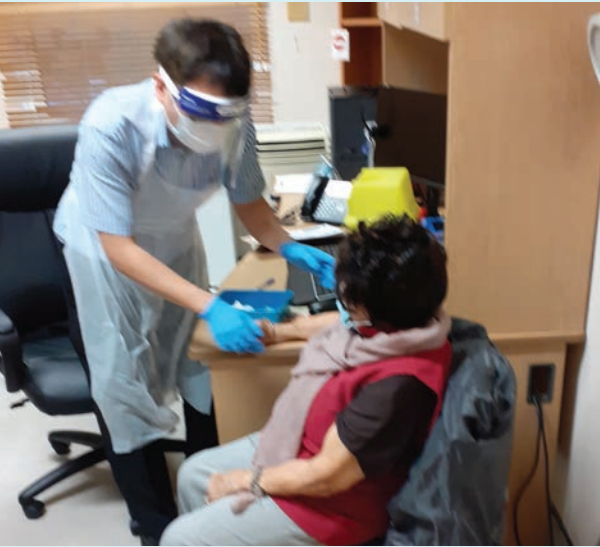
Lastly, I'm always really keen to hear from Croydon residents and support them where needed, so if you want to get in touch, do email me at patricia.hay-justice@croydon.gov.uk.



CLlr Patricia Hay-Justice
Cabinet Member for Homes

CONTINUED...

CELEBRATING A CROYDON RESIDENTS' 109 AMAZING YEARS



Born in St Mary, Jamaica on 9 November 1912, Merah-Louise is one of seven children (four sister and three brothers) and has outlived all her siblings. She grew up in Kingston Town and became a childcare worker after leaving school. She was married to James Smith in 1936 and widowed in 1959.

Croydon has been her home since she arrived in the UK in 1963 where her daughter was already living in England working as a nurse in the NHS. Merah-Louise and her daughter would have moved to the UK during the Windrush Generation, which refers to all people arriving in UK from the Caribbean between 1948 and 1970. Thornton Heath is home to more Windrush residents than any other in London.



Merah-Louise lived in Thornton Heath and New Addington before settling at Cromwell House in Croydon's Old Town in 1975 where she has lived for the past 51 years. Her son Tony cares for her at home. She has three children, Astrid, 89, Tony, 74, and Icha, 63, and six grandchildren, 11 great-grandchildren and three great-great-grandchildren.

Merah-Louise was a nurse in the NHS until her retirement but old age hasn't stopped Merah-Louise from making the most of life, so when the country went into lockdown and vulnerable people were advised to shield during the Covid-19 pandemic, things were especially difficult for her.



At 103 she spent two weeks on holiday in Jamaica and went to Cumbria for a granddaughter's wedding. She had been going to church twice a week. Her social life was full, going to the shops regularly, keep fit classes at her local gym and visiting friends.

When asked about the secret to her long and healthy life, she told us that it's down to her faith, reading the bible every day, cooking and eating fresh food. Over the years, modifications have been made to her home by Croydon Council and Age UK to support her, such as a stair lift and wet room with seated shower and her lever taps have been replaced a twist type.

We're honoured to be able to share the story of this inspirational lady with all our readers.



KEEPING YOUR HOME AND BUILDING SAFE FROM FIRE



Fire can start anywhere in the home. In this article, we want to raise awareness of the potential dangers that can lead to a fire and the steps you can take to prevent unnecessary risks.

STAYING SAFE INSIDE YOUR PROPERTY

- 1 Smoke alarms**

You're twice as likely to die in a fire if you don't have a smoke alarm that works. A working alarm can give you and your family the vital time needed to escape a fire. Ensure you test your smoke alarms regularly, and for alarms that are not hard wired, check the batteries and replace as necessary. NEVER remove the batteries from your smoke alarms.
- 2 Smoking**

Smoking is the most common cause of fire in the home so the best way to reduce the risk is not to smoke. If you're not ready to quit, Smoke outside – not in communal areas - and always make sure cigarettes are put out properly. Never smoke in bed or anywhere you could fall asleep. Do not leave any type of lit cigarette or pipe unattended. Use proper ashtrays and never throw hot ash into the bin. Keep matches and lighters away from children.
- 3 Candles**

Make sure that candles, tea lights and incense are in stable, heat resistant holders. Keep them away from anything that could catch fire such as curtains, furniture, paper, clothes and heaters. Keep matches and lighters away from children and never leave burning candles unattended.
- 4 Safe cooking**

Kitchens are the hub of the home but small lapses in concentration in the kitchen can lead to serious fire risk. The majority of fires start in the kitchen. Never leave pans unattended when cooking. Don't cook if you are tired, taking medication that might make you drowsy, or have been drinking alcohol - which is directly linked to 25% of all fires in the home. Turn off all appliances when you have finished cooking. If the pan catches fire, don't tackle the fire yourself or try to move the pan. Never throw water onto it as this can create a fireball. If you can do so safely – turn off the heat. Leave the room and close the door. Shout to warn others to get out, stay out and call 999.
- 5 Escape plan**

Do you know how you would escape in an emergency? If not, make a fire escape plan and discuss it with your family. Visit www.london-fire.gov.uk/safety/the-home/escape-plan/
- 6 Electrics and heaters**

Never overload electrical sockets. If you have to use a fused in-line adaptor or extension lead – know the limits. Don't leave items on continuous charge. Keep electrical appliances clean and in good working order. Keep heaters well away from anything that can catch alight and never use them to dry clothes.
- 7 Fire safety checks at bedtime**

A safe bedtime ritual will help ensure you sleep free of worry. Close all doors as this helps to prevent fire and smoke spreading. Only leave essential appliances switched on, such as the fridge or freezer. Switch off and unplug electrical items such as TVs. Avoid charging devices like mobile phones when you sleep. Make sure candles are out before you go to bed. Check your cooker and heaters are turned off.



STAYING SAFE IN COMMUNAL AREAS

- 1 Keep communal areas clear**

When you leave your flat, you may cross landings and balconies, walk down a staircase or through an entrance area which you share with your neighbours. These are known as communal areas. If your block had to evacuate in an emergency, communal areas must be clear so you and your neighbours can leave safely and do not prevent or delay putting the fire out. It's because of this, we have one simple rule for all communal areas: they must be clear at all times.

Storage of things like cardboard, garden furniture, artificial plants, plastic ornaments, electrical items, prams, buggies and bicycles and mobility scooters are not permitted for the ongoing safety of all our residents.

- 2 Don't smoke in lifts or communal areas**

Cigarettes are the cause of a significant number of fires in communal areas whether by accident or through careless disposal of cigarette butts. Items left in communal areas are often highly flammable and can release toxic smoke when burning. Please help us keep you and your neighbours' safe by not smoking in communal areas and disposing of cigarette butts safely and not storing belongings or dumping items in the communal areas. Your cooperation will help to reduce the risk of fire and keep you and your neighbours safe in your home all year round.

- 3 Fire doors**

Communal corridors and lobbies are designed to slow the spread of smoke and fire and provide a safe escape route if you need to escape from your property. Please do not wedge these doors open, they only work if they are closed.

- 4 If there's a fire**

If a fire breaks out in your home or if any of your smoke alarms go off, get out and call 999. Shout 'FIRE' to warn others and don't stop to pick up valuables. Check closed doors with the back of your hand. Do not open the door if it feels warm – the fire may be on the other side. Smoke can kill, get down as low as possible where the air will be clearer. If your escape is blocked by fire it may be safer to stay put and wait to be rescued.

If you have any health and safety concerns, or questions about fire safety where you live, please contact residentinvolvement@croydon.gov.uk.

For more details on fire safety in the home: www.london-fire.gov.uk/safety/the-home/



NO CONTENTS INSURANCE? WHY RISK IT?

Did you know that the council doesn't cover damage or loss of your home contents and possessions as part of your tenancy agreement?

Home contents insurance is designed to help protect your possessions. No matter how careful you are, there's always a risk that your belongings could be broken, damaged or stolen. A home contents insurance policy can help give you peace of mind in case the worst should happen.

You can arrange your own home contents insurance or apply for the council-run scheme. Croydon Council has teamed up with Thistle Insurance Services Limited, which offers specialist tenant contents insurance, covering contents of your home, including items such as furniture, carpets, curtains, clothes, bedding, electrical items, jewellery, pictures and ornaments. All tenants living in social and affordable housing are eligible to apply.

To be insured, all that you need is to maintain a clear rent account and to complete an application form to obtain approval. The insurance premiums are cheaper than many other insurance companies offer and you can pay in weekly instalments. This will make it a little easier to manage than finding a large lump sum payment. You can insure your home contents with premiums ranging from £1.78 to £6.22 per week, according to the amount of cover you want - £10,000 (minimum) to £35,000 (maximum).

For more information, an application form and the terms, conditions, limitations and exclusions contained in the policy booklet (Insurance Product Information Document) visit: www.croydon.gov.uk/housing/information-council-tenants/home-contents-insurance or email housingrentaccounting@croydon.gov.uk for a policy booklet to be sent to you.

ON A JOURNEY TO IMPROVE YOUR HOUSING SERVICES

Many of you will have heard about the findings of an independent report (ARK) last year following serious service failings at some flats in Regina Road, South Norwood, which led to some tenants having to live with regular water leaks and damp. It made a series of recommendations which should prevent a similar situation arising elsewhere in the borough. Work has been continuing over the past few months to address the issues at Regina Road with inspections taking place in properties to help us plan future improvements to homes and we are involving residents in discussions and decisions about improvements on the estate.

One of the recommendations in the report was about improving the way we communicate with our residents. We know that we need to get much better at listening to your concerns, opinions and ideas so last summer we carried out 27 visits to estates/blocks across Croydon and spoke to almost 700 residents about their experience of our housing services. Read on to find out the headlines of what you told us.



- + 31% of residents said their experience of our housing service was good or excellent, 34% average and 35% poor or very poor.**
- + We asked why residents felt this way, 10% of comments were positive, but negative comments were focussed on repairs (18%) customer service (10%), block maintenance/security (11%) and grass cutting (10%).**
- + Over 80% of residents told us they usually choose to contact us by phone. A third use email, but lower numbers were recorded for social media and letters.**
- + There was some positive feedback about contacting the service and getting things resolved although it can be difficult to get through to the right person, with long waiting times on the phone. Receiving a response or resolution to issues can be slow.**
- + Residents said that the repairs service, dealing with ASB, block security/maintenance, grass cutting and rehousing were the main areas needing improvement.**
- + A paper newsletter or face to face contact were the most popular ways for us to keep in touch. Email, a phone call or text message and notice boards were also popular.**
- + We asked how residents would like to tell us their views and over half of those we spoke with chose face to face contact as their top preference. Phone, paper and online surveys came second, followed by focus groups.**

We're grateful to everyone who spoke to us - your feedback will help us to understand what we need to change. Contact residentinvolvement@croydon.gov.uk or call **07789 395 721** if you'd like to share your experience, are having problems getting an issue resolved, or want get involved in monitoring our services on the estate or neighbourhood where you live.

RESIDENTS TAKE CENTRE STAGE ON OUR NEW HOUSING IMPROVEMENT BOARD

In the last edition of Open House, we told you about the Housing Improvement Board (HIB) that's been set up to oversee the work we are doing as part of our Housing Improvement Plan. Croydon residents have now been appointed to this Board and we spoke to the Chair, Martin Wheatley, to find out what brought him to the role.

OH: Can you tell us a bit about your background?

MW: I've been living in in Crystal Palace, Upper Norwood for about 25 years, not far from the Auckland Rise estate. I've done lots of work with residents and have professional experience in relation to housing. I've previously been involved in community development work with residents about improving the town centre in New Addington.

OH: How did you become chair of the Board?

MW: I saw the role advertised and felt strongly that I didn't want to sit on the side-lines. I hoped that my background and skills would help the council in its recovery. I have a genuine commitment to addressing these issues and want to help.

OH: Tell us a bit about the board

MW: Half of board members are tenants with lived experience of housing services, there are residents but also councillors and officers who are responsible for delivering improvements to services. The council has set the board up as an independent critical

friend to look at what is going on and listening directly to tenants. We give an independent view on the council's approach. We're also looking outside of Croydon to understand what other social landlords are doing. We've had our first meeting to get to know each other and understand where things stand at the moment.

OH: What do you think are the key main areas of work?

MW: Continuing work to improve the condition of homes on the Regina Road estate is of course a priority. The Board wants to see that progress has been made on the estate but more broadly in other areas. We also want to see that tenants are treated with respect not only in how we communicate with them, but also show this through providing an acceptable level of service. I also want to look at how the council uses information and data to ensure that problems are picked up before they escalate into much larger issues. There will of course be problems from time to time in any service but what we do about it and communicating that back to residents is so important.

OH: What would you say to residents reading this that want to give feedback or share their ideas about Croydon's housing services?

MW: Any resident who wants to talk to me or share with the board their experience of council housing services or ideas about managing it in future, can contact HibChair@croydon.gov.uk. We will pick it up and do something with it. We are going to participate in as many discussions with tenants as much as we can and welcome any feedback residents wish to share with us.





GET INVOLVED

RESIDENTS ON BOARD!

WE ASKED CROYDON RESIDENTS WHO'VE BEEN APPOINTED TO THE HOUSING IMPROVEMENT BOARD (HIB) WHY THEY SIGNED UP AND WHAT CHANGES THEY WANT TO SEE.



Yaw

Yaw Boateng, HIB, chair of Tenant & Leaseholder Panel, performance monitoring group, scrutiny and complaint panels

“My priority is to repair the damage that’s been done to the tenant and landlord relationship and find out from residents what needs to change to create a ‘good relationship’. I also want to bring to the conversation best practice from other social landlords and see Croydon earn back the ‘Beacon’ status it once enjoyed.”



Les

Les Parry, South Norwood tenant, HIB, performance monitoring group, health & safety, scrutiny, tenant & leaseholder and complaint panels

“I first experienced difficulties as a resident then council tenant many years ago. More recently from 2018, I have felt that residents’ voices were not being heard on housing issues. To achieve the change and improve Croydon’s housing services, you have to be part of the process, have your voice listened to and not be on the outside. The long and winding road has only just begun!”



Ishia

Ishia Beckford, HIB, tenant & leaseholder and complaints panels

“I’ve lived in Croydon for the past 21 years, and a council tenant for around 19 years. Anyone who knows me will tell you how passionate I am about residents having their voices heard, I have represented residents and myself about numerous housing issues. Joining the board is important to me as this is opportunity for the council to take seriously what their tenants are saying, to improve housing services, the housing stock itself and improve their relationship with us.”

Fahad Eisa, HIB and Regina Road resident

“Croydon is our home, our future. I’m involved in this board because I want to help us build a thriving community that serves everyone.”

THE KEEP CROYDON SAFE CHAMPIONS



COMMUNITY CHAMPIONS ARE HERE TO HELP YOU GET TESTED!

The Keep Croydon Safe (KCS) Champions, provided by Croydon Council's public health team, are out spreading awareness of the importance of regular testing for Covid-19.

These KCS Champions have been popping up with their gazebo in high streets and locations all over Croydon, encouraging residents to take free assisted rapid lateral flow tests if they're out and about, and distributing test kits they can take home.

Visiting different sites on a rota basis, helping people across the borough to access free tests and information on Covid-19 as the pandemic changes. These could be residents with a language barrier, lack of access to technology for online ordering of tests or people who simply need a bit of help with doing a test.

Last month the team launched their KCS testing vans in addition to their pop up sites, allowing the Champions become more visible and mobile, so they can quickly react to situations where their presence will help.

The Champions also host targeted events for groups within the borough who are at a higher risk of becoming severely ill from Covid-19, those who feel unsure about vaccination, and people who live in multi-generation households or shared living. The team has also assisted at asylum seeker hotels and teamed up with homelessness services, ensuring everyone in Croydon has access to lateral flow testing.

If you are out and about in Croydon and you see our Champions out on the street, feel free to speak with them and complete a free lateral flow test. Results are confirmed within 30 minutes.

Dawn Richardson, Programme Manager for Public Health at Croydon, said: *"Our champions have helped thousands of residents stay safe and prevent the virus spreading in our communities, by helping more people access lateral flow tests. Thanks to everyone who has visited our champions to date – we're here to help Croydon keep moving in the right direction through the pandemic."*

THEY ARE HERE TO KEEP US SAFE!

- Over 140,000 conversations with residents
- We've popped up over 1000 times across the borough
- More than 17,000 supervised lateral flow tests
- Over 80,000 free home test kits distributed
- 153 positive cases found, and chains of transmission broken

GET VACCINATED

All adults in Croydon have now been offered at least two doses of the Covid-19 vaccine. Unless you are medically unable to receive a vaccine, we ask that you get vaccinated and have your vaccine as soon as possible. Being fully vaccinated is the best way of protecting you, your family and friends against Covid-19.



YOUR FEEDBACK MATTERS!

Please scan here or visit www.getinvolved.croydon.gov.uk/covid-19-community-rapid-lateral-flow-ld-testing-service

EASING OF RESTRICTIONS

Now that Plan B restrictions have been lifted, we are starting to live with the virus and begin to find our 'new normal'. However, infection rates within the borough are still too high for complacency. One in three people with Covid-19 show no symptoms and even if fully vaccinated, people can still spread the virus.

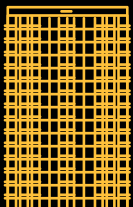
We need our community to continue to test regularly. Although face coverings are no longer mandatory, we recommend you continue to wear one in indoor settings and crowded environments – please remember that face coverings are still required on all Transport for London services unless exempt. Please continue to wash your hands, keep indoor spaces ventilated and get vaccinated.



If you are worried about the lifting of restrictions, you can find advice from the NHS by scanning the QR code or visiting www.nhs.uk/every-mind-matters/coronavirus/tips-to-cope-with-anxiety-lockdown-lifting/

POP-UP TEST SITES

You can take a rapid lateral flow test and be notified of your result within 30 minutes at our pop-up test sites across the borough. The times and locations of the sites can be found by scanning the QR code or visiting www.croydon.gov.uk/covid19test



YOUR HEALTH & WELLBEING

Over 16 and struggling with smoking, diet, alcohol or your mental health through Covid-19? WE CAN HELP! Contact Croydon's Live Well team for FREE one-to-one advice:

📞 0800 019 570 @ LiveWell@croydon.gov.uk 🌐 JustBeCroydon.org



For free tools and support to start leading a healthier lifestyle visit nhs.uk/better-health

Better Health
Let's do this



NHS HEALTH CHECK

Aged 40-74? Get your **FREE NHS Health Check** today! Scan the QR code for more information



NEED TO KNOW



WATER CHARGES FROM APRIL 2022

From April 2022, if your water and wastewater is provided by SES Water, you will no longer pay your water charges to Croydon Council. Instead SES Water will bill you and you will pay your water charges directly to them. You will only pay your rent to Croydon Council. Over the coming weeks SES Water will be writing to you to explain the new arrangements and who you should contact for support and to answer any of your questions.

If you are a tenant of Borough Grange, Sanderstead or Toldene Court in Coulsdon, your water charges will still be collected by Croydon Council on behalf of SES Water.

SES Water are a water-only company and are not involved in any aspects of treating or discharging wastewater and sewage. Their customers' wastewater is managed by either Thames Water or Southern Water and they bill on their behalf.

RENT INCREASES

In line with government guidelines and council policy on rent levels, it is proposed that rents for social housing properties increase this year by the inflation rate + 1%. This means a 4.1% increase in council rents from 4 April 2022. If this proposal is agreed by the council's cabinet and you rent a property from Croydon Council, you will see an increase in your rental charges from this date. In addition to rents, it is also proposed that tenant service charges, garage rents and parking space charges increase by 4.1% from 4 April 2022.

If you need further information about the rent increase please email CouncilRents@croydon.gov.uk

COUNCIL TAX SUPPORT

NEW £30M COUNCIL TAX SUPPORT SCHEME FOR RESIDENTS MOST IN NEED

The council is proposing a revised council tax support scheme for its working-aged residents, which means 16,000 of the borough's most in need households may receive up to 100% council tax support. The scheme – which comes into effect in April and was backed by over 80% of Croydon residents in a recent consultation – will support households on the lowest income by reducing the council tax they're liable to pay by up to 80%. This includes extra support for eligible lone parents with children under five, families with young children, carers, disabled residents and people on universal credit. The council is also setting up a hardship fund to assist residents who may need financial help as they adapt to the new scheme.

A MAKEOVER FOR OUR SIX EXTRA CARE HOMES

It's been a tough couple of years for residents living in supported accommodation with all the restrictions of the Covid-19 pandemic so we were delighted to involve residents living in all six of our extra care homes in Croydon in plans to spruce up communal areas. Residents were involved in decisions about the design and layout of the space, décor, flooring, lounge furniture, lighting and dining areas. As we edge towards the spring months, and return to a more normal way of life, our residents are looking forward to using the space to spend time with family and friends. All of the upgrades are up-to-date with current fire safety regulations.



SOUTHSEA COURT BEFORE



SOUTHSEA COURT AFTER

HELP FOR CROYDON HOUSEHOLDS THIS WINTER

Help is at hand for those in urgent financial need this winter through the Household Support Fund (HSF). It's funded by £3m from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), and the council is using it to help the borough's most vulnerable residents from December 2021 until March 2022. Croydon residents can apply for the HSF grant to get help paying for food, gas, electricity and other essentials items (including beds and essential

white goods). The scheme includes support specifically for vulnerable households in emergency or temporary accommodation, council homes, those who are at risk of homelessness, and rough sleepers over the winter. Further funding will be allocated on a discretionary basis to support other vulnerable residents, including older people, care leavers, and families experiencing domestic abuse and other hardship. To be eligible you must be a

Croydon resident, over 16 years of age, in urgent financial need and unable to get support elsewhere.



Further information, including eligibility and the application form, can be found on the council's website at www.croydon.gov.uk/benefits/household-support-fund-hsf. Applications can be emailed to the discretionary support team at dhp2@croydon.gov.uk or ring 020 8604 7226.