



## Growing Together Project Team

... more on page 4

# WELCOME FROM THE CEO



Hi all...  
as we hurtle towards the end of another year, we thought we would try a different format with the newsletter and very much look forward to hearing what you think.

We have included information from some of our community partners to hopefully give you more of a flavour as to what Almond is about. You, our tenants, and the communities you live in are at the heart of all we do, and we probably don't share enough information with you about some of the great work that is happening on your doorstep. In the last newsletter I referred to the AEL project which was aiming to establish a training and employability scheme. I am pleased to advise that we have recruited a new multi-trade operative/supervisor who started with us at the end of October, and we are looking to have our first trainee join us in January 2025. We will provide further updates as the scheme progresses.

I also referred to Almond's 30th anniversary in the last newsletter and you will note in this issue that we have provided a focus on our longest serving colleague Wil, who has been with us for an impressive 29 years. We are fortunate to have a committed team who work hard every day to provide you with the best service possible and an amazing 35% of them have over 12 years' service!

As outlined on page 10, we have been keen to mark our 30 years by giving back to you, our valued tenants. Good luck in the forthcoming draw which will hopefully help the lucky recipients in some small way.

I hope that you are looking forward to a restful and peaceful festive period and that you can spend quality time with friends and family.

As ever, please contact me at [john.davidson@almondha.org.uk](mailto:john.davidson@almondha.org.uk) if you have a particular issue that you would like us to address, or ideas on how we can improve the services we provide.

All best wishes,  
John

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'John Davidson', with a stylized flourish at the end.

## COMMUNITY

### Contractor Community Benefits

Did you know that each contractor we work with has to give back to the local community as part of their contract with us? We call this *contractor community benefits* and they are an integral part of Almond's approach to, and policy on procurement. We want to ensure that procurement processes result in wider meaningful social

benefits within the local communities where Almond operates.

#### What is procurement?

Procurement is the process of sourcing goods, services and works: from identifying a need for them, to acquiring them, and the full lifecycle of the contract.

## What types of community benefit have been secured so far this year?

As some of the contracts procured in the year span more than one financial year, it is worth noting that not all community benefits secured are delivered in the same year.

So far since April 2024 community benefits have been delivered in the following ways:

**Continental Landscapes** – donated fruit trees for a community orchard valued at £1,150

**Response Building Maintenance** – contributed £300 to support the creation of the orchard

These are only a small example of some of the community benefits; lots more will come to fruition over the coming months.

and £900 of supermarket vouchers to support community activities

**Rodgers and Johnston** – contributed £300 to support the creation of the community orchard

**Almond Enterprises** – pledged time to help clear the orchard areas and take the rubbish to the recycling centre

**Big Fish** – donated £300 Morrisons vouchers to support community activities

**Johnstone Decorating** – supplied 30 tins of paint to help tenants in need

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**A benefit of a different kind – GD Chalmers Ltd** – recruited and employed a local lass from Livingston onto their apprenticeship programme, offering her a marvellous opportunity to train with them and learn valuable skills and qualifications

Paul Morrow, Managing Director of GD Chalmers, acknowledges the benefits of an apprenticeship having started his working life in the same way. The company, which was established by his father 50 years ago, now employs around 60 people, 4 or 5 of whom are apprentices or adult trainees. Paul started at the bottom of the company and worked his way through the various roles before finally taking over running the company when his Dad retired.

Livingston based Katie is the first female apprentice electrician they have had. Paul explains:

*“We try to enlist at least 2 apprentices a year. It is an expense but very worthwhile. As a local employer, it is important for us to give back to the community and provide opportunities, especially for the young people. If we train them well and they are happy, more often than not, they stay with us as a full time employee. We jumped at the chance to take on Katie as part of our contract with Almond and she is doing brilliantly.”*

John Davidson, Almond CEO commented: *“We are delighted that GD Chalmers has provided Katie with this invaluable opportunity to learn a skilled trade with paid employment and genuine long-term prospects. We wish Katie every success for her apprenticeship and look forward to seeing her on site within Almond properties.”*



# Growing Together

Founded in 2019, the Growing Together initiative was established as a direct result of community engagement and consultation. Craighill residents are the driving force behind the creation of the project, voicing a need for community-based activities, workshops and events to help and support local people. Almond HA secured funding from the Scottish Government's Investing in Communities Fund and has worked tirelessly to distribute the funding directly into the community via local partners.

A project team was created to lead and manage Growing Together, currently comprising of Barbara Boertien, Community Engagement Officer from Almond HA, Alex Fleming, Chief Officer from Spark, Helen Davis, Director of West Lothian Youth Action Project (WLYAP) and David Tatton, Growing Together Community Champion.

In addition to David, the project also has two Community Gardeners, Colin and Andy, and Kirsty who is the Activities and Volunteer Coordinator. Working closely with partners, Growing Together has developed and delivered a wide range of environmental, growing, wellbeing and community building activity.



A small snippet of the achievements in the last 6 months alone include:

- 🌸 A series of biodiversity workshops which have been delivered to every P5, P6 & P7 child from the two local primary schools. Run from two of the community garden spaces, the sessions gave 134 children the opportunity to learn about their local environment
- 🌸 The 'gardener led' program of activity across the community gardens has supported volunteers with guided learning on topics such as food growing, harvesting and preparing fruit & veg, bird box making and open fire cooking sessions
- 🌸 A large joint event was co-ordinated with the Woodland Trust to tackle fire damage and antisocial behaviour in the local east wood. The



event, 'Love your Craigswood' was an opportunity to deliver a fun and educational day for the community in partnership with the West Lothian Fire Service, West Lothian Litter Pickers, and West Lothian Youth Action Project, amongst others. It was a chance to tell people about the woods and the social opportunities they provide, but also how best to use the space in a considerate and protective way

🌸 The expansion of the mental health and wellbeing courses; six separate workshops delivered a broad range of wellbeing and resilience building, including 'Mental Health First Aid' training

🌸 Work with WLYAP and Spark to engage with an additional 33 young people in their community,

which contributed over 1000 hours for projects and activity in Craigshill

🌸 18 volunteers moved on to positive destinations - 3 employment, 6 Further Education, 6 other training, 3 further volunteering... plus 3 trainees have successfully completed their traineeships and have also now moved on to positive destinations

🌸 Providing regular fresh vegetables from the Craigshill community garden to the Craigshill community fridge each week - 200kg+

🌸 Multiple workshops such as herbal & floral tea making, craft clubs, storytelling, bug hotel

### For 2025

The team will continue to engage with residents, groups and local schools, working together to help the Craigshill community thrive. Lots more events and activities are planned - keep your eye on Facebook ([growingtogetherlivi](https://www.facebook.com/growingtogetherlivi)) and website: [www.growingtogether-craigshill.org.uk](http://www.growingtogether-craigshill.org.uk)

NB: although this initiative is based in Craigshill and aimed at local residents, all Almond tenants are welcome to join in.



# Big Living Room

Did you know that The Big Living Room, which is downstairs at Almond HQ, is available for the community to use? If you are organising a neighbourhood event or meeting, we may be able to accommodate you.

The room can hold around 90 people standing and there is a kitchen area available for the organisers to use. Dependent on your requirements we might be able to assist so, please get in touch to discuss: [enquiries@almondha.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@almondha.org.uk)



## OPERATION: HAPPY CHRISTMAS

This year, we have decided to support the great work that our community partners are already doing by providing financial contributions and in kind support to ensure that our tenants who are struggling financially this winter, can get the assistance they need.

This might include food parcels, winter clothing or Christmas gifts. Our housing team can still make referrals to many of the services, or can certainly signpost you, so please get in touch if you need any help – [enquiries@almondha.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@almondha.org.uk) or call **01506 439 291**.

# Social Prescribing

It is a phrase that is used quite a lot these days, especially in healthcare but what does it mean? In simple terms, it is help that doesn't come in a tube or a bottle. It is a process of connecting people to activities, groups and support with an aim to improve health and wellbeing by addressing non-medical factors such as loneliness, debt or stress.

Healthcare professionals are able to refer people to a whole variety of, predominantly voluntary or community organisations to help support the individual to take better control of their health from a more holistic viewpoint.

Within our area, there are many organisations who work within this arena, providing various social prescribing activities. A couple are listed here:

## Craigsfarm

Craigsfarm delivers a comprehensive mental wellbeing and resilience programme, which is free to the community, offering many courses that assist with addressing mental distress. It is also the home of Andysmanclub in Craigshill. Craigsfarm offers a place for connection and friendship through its community café which provides a barista menu from 9am-2pm Monday to Friday. For more information or registration, please email: [admin@craigsfarm.org.uk](mailto:admin@craigsfarm.org.uk)



## Spark

Their vision is that everyone experiencing social isolation in the community feels valued and has the chance to spark their potential. They offer a weekly timetable of events from arts & crafts to carpet bowls and bingo. Although they are based in Craigshill, people come from all over the area to join in and they are always on the lookout for volunteers to help with their social enterprise. If you would like to learn more, please visit [www.sparkscot.com](http://www.sparkscot.com)

## Polbeth

Polbeth Community Hub offers services and activities that locals can access for free or at a low cost. The activities include toddlers, messy play, baby sensory, gaming clubs, tea & talk, gentle exercise, crafting groups, and volunteering groups who look after their Vinted project and small garden area.

Their services include a low cost community shop, a donation based counselling service, wellbeing activities, in person access to the Advice Shop, Social Security Scotland and Citizens Advice. You can keep up to date with everything at the Hub via their Facebook ([PolbethCommunityHub](https://www.facebook.com/PolbethCommunityHub)) or [www.polbeth.com](http://www.polbeth.com)

## Ladywell

The Ladywell Neighbourhood Network is based in a community house in the heart of the community at 28 Heatherbank, with larger groups using the Forestbank Community Centre.

They work with socially isolated adults in the community and offer activities every week day, from Woodland Walks and Board Buddies to Thingamyjig Tuesdays! More details can be found here: [www.ladywellinn.org.uk](http://www.ladywellinn.org.uk)

# NEWS

## Developments



### Katherine Street

In January 2022 a fire broke out in the flats at Katherine St causing major damage. The following two years saw the Association working closely with our insurers, loss adjusters, planners and engineers to prepare for appointing a contractor to deliver the project on site.

The full removal of the front and rear elevations of the block allowed us to take the opportunity to bring the block up to current energy standards and trial some Net Zero technology. Rather than replacing the gas central heating system we will be installing air source heat pumps, supported by a grant from the Scottish Government.

The contractor started in January 2024 and the first phase of the work saw the building stripped back to its shell. Where possible we have improved the layout of the building but within the constraints of the original structure. All ground floor flats have had their baths removed and

replaced with shower unit trays. French doors have been installed which should provide a bright and welcoming environment.

We are hoping that the property will be ready to accept tenants from early next summer, 2025. We will keep you posted on how this work is coming along.



### Rowan Terrace, Blackburn

This is a new development of 20 one and two bedroom flats across three storeys on part of the site of the former Mill Shopping Centre. Following extensive consultation with the local community



about the future use of the site, the owners proposed a redevelopment to include new housing whilst retaining a smaller number of retail units. Almond confirmed interest in being involved in the housing provision after securing support from West Lothian Council and Scottish Government. Despite initial discussions taking place in 2018, it was not until March of this year that construction work started (the full development process can be very long, not helped in this instance by the covid pandemic). The new flats are bright and

spacious with all ground floor flats having shower rooms rather than bathrooms to make them more accessible.

We are pleased that this project contributes to a mini regeneration of the area, with the remaining shops having had an internal refurbishment by the owners prior to the start of Almond's housing development. As with Katherine Street, we hope this development will also be complete for tenants to move into from early summer of 2025 and we will keep you updated.

## Adaptations

### Customers could be without essential adaptations due to an approximate 50% reduction in funding

AHA carries out medical adaptations with grant funding from the Scottish Government. Last year 127 adaptations were completed with grant funding of almost £158,000. Despite applying for the same levels of grant for this year, and following significant delay, the amount awarded is almost 50% less than last year.

Adaptations are alterations in a person's home to allow them to live more independently - these include the conversion of a bathroom to a walk-in shower, installing a stairlift or additional handrails etc.

Iona Taylor, Director of Asset Management, elaborates:

*"It is about making the property as accessible as possible to ensure the person can continue to stay in their own home. Referrals come to us from the local Occupational Health teams and our most common adaptations are hand/grab rail fittings and shower room installations".*

Local resident Hilda Dolan recently had her downstairs toilet converted into a wet room and is over the moon: *"It's an absolute god send"* said Hilda who since fracturing her spine had struggled to access her over the bath shower.



Her occupational therapist put in the referral having deemed it too dangerous for her to use her shower. She couldn't step over the bath and had

been relying on the goodwill of friends and family in allowing her to use their facilities:

*“There are only so many times you can keep asking for help and let’s be honest, a strip wash is OK, but it isn’t a shower!” she exclaimed “It’s great to have my independence back and it’s really sad to hear that the funding has been cut, because others will miss out. This adaptation for me has been life changing”.*

With a backlog of major adaptation work waiting to be completed, much of AHAs funding has already been allocated. John Davidson, AHA CEO, explained that future adaptation requests will be on a first come first served basis until the money runs out.

*“We will self-fund minor adaptations as we have already been doing, but major works will have to*

*be carefully considered. There is a possibility that we may be able to move customers to a more suitable property if we are unable to carry out the alterations.”*

Obviously AHA is not alone in this situation, all housing associations have been hit. In the press recently Scotland’s largest housing provider, Hanover Scotland, commented on the possibility that cuts in funding would result in bed-blocking and an increased burden on the NHS and social care whilst tenants wait for their property to be adapted. Fortunately, none of AHA’s residents are currently in this situation but there are likely to be some customers who are left waiting much longer than we would like for essential alterations to their homes.

## 30th Anniversary

**1994 was the year that it all started for Almond Housing Association!**

On the 22nd March we registered with the FCA (Financial Conduct Authority) and then on the 3rd October we were formally registered as a Registered Social Landlord.

To celebrate the last 3 months of our 30th anniversary year, we are going to be running a free prize draw for all tenants. For every day between January 1st and 31st March a £30 voucher will be given to a randomly drawn tenant; so 31 in January, 28 in February and 31 in March. Winners will be announced at the end of each month.

Also to mark the occasion, and as a long-term investment in the community, we will be planting

two community orchards – one in Craigshill by Hobart Street, the other is proposed for Huron Avenue in Howden. By the time you are reading this,

we hope to have a good number of trees in the ground, this will of course be weather dependent.

Colleagues also wanted to do something to honour this milestone in our organisation, and the suggestion was to undertake 30 days of volunteering. So far we have had staff painting and decorating, working in charity shops, helping with shopping, assisting support workers and providing high level business advice within a whole variety of organisations.



# ALMOND ENTERPRISES LIMITED (AEL)

## Who are we?

Almond Enterprises Limited (AEL) was formed in 2005 as a wholly owned subsidiary of Almond Housing Association Limited (AHA). We operate as a Social Enterprise company and are based at AHA's premises in Craigshill. When first set up, the principle was to give local people the opportunity of jobs and personal development, and to support local groups through surplus funds.

Governed by a voluntary Board of Directors who are responsible for overseeing the strategic direction of the company, the day to day responsibility for service delivery and performance management is delegated to our

16 staff through Vicky the manager.

We carry out a range of high quality, good value cleaning and environmental services across West Lothian. Initially stair cleaning services were our 'bread and butter' however over time the business has developed and diversified, providing other complementary business streams such as office cleaning, uplifts and recycling, minor repairs and garden clearance to name just a few. Although we still provide services to AHA, we have expanded our client list to include the local council, property factors as well other commercial companies in the area.

## Winter checks

AHA commissions us to do winter checks for all those households where the tenants are aged 70 years or over.

We have been doing this for over 7 years and have been lucky to have the same member of staff carry out the checks. Hugh not only looks over the property, so things like identifying where the stopcock is, checking repairs, making sure the property is secure, but he also checks in on the tenants. In the past Hugh has been able to refer people to their housing officer for welfare support and assistance.

The checks will continue throughout the winter months. To gauge feedback we have been phoning tenants to ask what they think of the service, and so far we are pleased to report that it's been very well received with many scoring the service 10 out of 10!



# Fly tipping

Fly tipping has increasingly become more of an issue of late. Some say it is due to the change in service offered by the local council; nowadays it is easier to dump household items or extra bin bags, rather than arrange to dispose of them appropriately.

We acknowledge that it may not be Almond tenants who are leaving the mess, but if rubbish is on Almond owned land, Almond is responsible for removing it, which is ultimately at a cost to you.

We wanted to share this information just so you are aware of the figures involved.

When an incident of fly tipping is reported, the AHA housing officers request us to respond. Just from April to September this year (2024), we have dealt with 68.5 tonnes of waste at a cost of £15,820 which is a 26% increase on the same period last year. We have also had to increase our storage facility in order to sort the rubbish.



## FOR TENANTS

### Money Advisor (via Action Group)

After a bit of a gap, due to a change in personnel, we are pleased to announce that the in-house advisor service is back up and running and we would like to introduce you to Catherine.

Catherine's role is to help tenants to access the right benefits. She can:

- ❖ Signpost for debt advice
- ❖ Look at grant support
- ❖ Do a full benefit check (to maximise your income)

- ❖ Provide council tax help
- ❖ Advocate on your behalf
- ❖ Support those with children – free school meals/young carers/EMA (Education Maintenance Allowance)

Housing Officers can refer people into this service, or as a tenant, you can self-refer. It operates via an appointment system but can be face to face (in the office or home visits), via the phone, or video call.



A bit about me – I come with 15 years' experience working in welfare and benefits, and within that, working with specific marginalised groups, for example, survivors of gender based violence, asylum seekers, LGBT young people with a focus on trans youth to name just a few.

I'm a collector of short lived hobbies (I'm a hobby graveyard), and runner afterer of a 7 year old, consequently, I'm always ready for a nap!

Catherine will be working Tuesday to Friday, and you can contact her on: **0131 285 5207** or [catherinesomerville@actiongroup.org.uk](mailto:catherinesomerville@actiongroup.org.uk)

## Universal Credit Managed Migration

### What does this mean?

Universal Credit is replacing 5 'legacy benefits':

- ❖ Working and/or Child Tax Credits
- ❖ Income Support
- ❖ Income Based Job Seeker's Allowance (JSA)
- ❖ Income Related Employment & Support Allowance (ESA)
- ❖ Housing Benefit

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) calls this Managed Migration.

If you're on any of these benefits, and of working age, you will receive a migration letter asking you to claim Universal Credit.

**You don't need to do anything before you get this letter.**

By waiting until you receive a migration letter, you'll be covered by Transitional Protection. Transitional Protection is an amount included in your Universal Credit award to ensure you're not worse off.

### IT'S IMPORTANT TO:

***Make sure your existing benefit payments are correct*** This will ensure your payments on Universal Credit include the right transitional amounts.

***Claim by the deadline on your letter*** You have three months from the date of the migration letter to claim Universal Credit. If you don't claim by the deadline, your benefit or tax credits will end.

***Request an extension, if you require more time.*** If you can't claim by the deadline, you can ask DWP to extend it. You can only request this before the original deadline in the letter.

***Time your claim*** You can consider waiting to claim Universal Credit until after your next benefit or tax credit payment. This will reduce the gap between benefit payments.

***Get advice*** If you have any questions about Universal Credit migration, would like help to check that your existing benefit payments are correct, or help to claim Universal Credit, please get in touch with Catherine or speak to your Housing Officer who can pass your enquiry on to Catherine.

## Festive opening hours

We are closed from 12.30pm on Tuesday 24th December until 9am on Friday 3rd January. To report an emergency repair when our office is closed, please call 01506 439 291 and select option 3, or contact the out of hours service directly on 0141 225 2842.



## ALMOND AWARD WINNER



Congratulations to **Jane Marnie** who won our Almond Award this quarter and was presented with **£250 worth of vouchers**.

The Almond Award draw is our way of thanking customers for keeping on top of their rent payments, taking care of their home and generally being a good tenant.

To ensure you are eligible for the draw simply:

- 1 Maintain a clear rent account for a minimum period of three months immediately prior to the draw
- 2 Ensure you have not been involved in causing anti-social behaviour in your area
- 3 Maintain your tenancy and any garden area to a satisfactory standard
- 4 Allow our contractors to gain access to your home where appropriate
- 5 Be a member of our tenant consultation list

*Please get in touch to find out more and sign up.*

# Winter tips – keeping warm



## Feeling chilly?

❄ Put on an extra layer of clothing, an extra jumper or pair of socks can make all the difference because layering will help trap your body heat and keep you warmer

❄ Move around and keep as active as possible to help boost your circulation

❄ Use a higher tog duvet on your bed to avoid leaving the heating on overnight

❄ Try using a hot water bottle, fill it up with the leftover kettle water from your cuppa

❄ Get some extra blankets and pop them by the side of your bed in case you get cold during the night

❄ Eat healthily and drink lots of hot drinks throughout the day but avoid alcohol



How much heat your home retains will largely be down to its structure, but there are small steps you can take to boost its energy efficiency:

❄ Place reflective panels behind your radiator to reflect heat back into your room

❄ Lay rugs on hard flooring to keep heat in

❄ Use draught excluders around the base of doors

❄ Fit heavy curtains, they stop heat from escaping through windows and doors

❄ Report any repairs such as gaps or cracks in window frames that could be allowing heat to escape



Heating is probably one of the most expensive bills you have as a tenant but there are ways you can reduce those bills. The tips below are a good place to start:

❄ Turn down your thermostat by one degree – this could save you around 10% on your bill and you'll barely notice the difference in temperature (NB: rooms should be heated to a minimum of 18C)

❄ If furniture is sitting in front of your radiators, move it – it will be blocking and absorbing heat

❄ If your radiators have temperature control valves, turn them down in rooms you don't use often and close the doors

❄ Turn off your heating at night and when the property is empty (NB: all rooms should be heated occasionally to avoid the risk of condensation and mould forming)

❄ Reduce your hot water usage by having a shorter shower

## Did you know...



Drinking alcohol makes blood vessels near your skin open up? With more blood flowing into them and creating a feeling of warmth on your skin, this means that blood is being diverted away from your vital central organs which can cause your core temperature to drop

# STAFF SPOTLIGHT

Been around nearly as long as the Association!

We are heading back to the year when Dolly the sheep was cloned, the Spice Girls released "Wannabe", Charles & Di officially divorced, Lewis Capaldi was born and Wil joined Almond Housing Association! Yes, it's 1996!

Wil initially came on board for a 10-month contract at the time when tenants were being balloted as to which organisation they would like to manage their property. Once Almond knew which



properties were theirs, Wil was offered a full-time post as a Housing Officer... and we are lucky to have had him here ever since!

When asked why, Wil joked "I'm unemployable! But in all seriousness, it is a great place to work. I never clock watch, I'm always busy and I love the freedom I have to manage my workload".

Prior to Almond, Wil worked as a Financial Advisor although his job straight out of school was in housing. Outside of work, he loves a game of squash which he plays 3 or 4 times a week and if you want to buy him a spot of dinner, his choice would be a medium rare filet steak at the local Italian restaurant!

When asked to regale tales of Almond life, he talked of working with generations of families and seeing the babies of tenants turn into tenants themselves. He also remembers an occasion where he thought he'd been swiped by a stealth like dog when posting a calling card through the letterbox. Re-telling the horrors back in the office, it turned out he'd just been caught by a wee pussy cat! Congratulations and thanks to Wil for his long service.

## USEFUL TELEPHONE NUMBERS

To report an emergency repair when our office is closed, please call 01506 439291 and select option 3 or contact the out of hours service directly on 0141 225 2842.

<b>Almond Housing Association</b>	<b>01506 439 291</b>	<b>Police</b>	<b>101</b>
<b>Gas Leaks</b>	<b>0800 111 999</b>	<b>Refuse Collection</b>	<b>01506 280 000</b>
<b>Citizens Advice Bureau</b>	<b>01506 432 977</b>	<b>Scottish Power</b>	<b>(General) 0845 270 0700</b>
<b>Craigshill Health Centre</b>	<b>01506 432 621</b>		<b>(Emergency) 0845 272 7999</b>
<b>Home Energy Scotland</b>	<b>0808 808 2282</b>	<b>St John's Hospital</b>	<b>01506 523 000</b>
<b>Homeless Persons</b>	<b>0800 032 3450</b>	<b>Street Lighting</b>	<b>01506 280 000</b>
<b>Howden Health Centre</b>	<b>01506 423 800</b>	<b>West Lothian Council</b>	<b>01506 280 000</b>
<b>Litter Hotline</b>	<b>0800 616 446</b>		