

Tenant Topics

Newsletter for
Two Rivers Housing
Tenants



OUR YOUNG INSPECTORS



The Junior Wardens are ready to spruce up their town. They are, left to right, Charlie Vaughan (10), Sean Kear (10), Josh Creed (10), Jamie Powells (11), Alexa Keating (11) and Krystal Brown (10).

Primary school pupils in Coleford are taking an active interest in keeping the area around their school safe and tidy by becoming estate inspectors.

Groups of 10 and 11-year-olds from St John's C of E Academy have signed up as Two Rivers 'Junior Wardens', pledging to clamp down on litter, graffiti, parking hazards, vandalism and dog mess in their town, particularly in the area around their school.

A third of pupils live in our homes so this initiative, led by Jane Cordier, our Community Projects Co-ordinator, will benefit them out of school, as well.

"All the things that worry them are in the control of the people who live there," said Jane. "It's about wanting to live in a nice place and respecting your neighbours. The Junior Wardens are the eyes and ears of their community, and we will do our bit by working with residents and agencies to tackle the issues they raise."

The students started by identifying the issues causing them greatest concern and monthly activities have been planned for the children to tackle them. These include estate walkabouts, litter-picking and speed awareness.

Julie Griffiths, Deputy Headteacher, said: *"The children have been very enthusiastic about looking after the local environment. They have taken their role as Junior Wardens very seriously and are keen to see improvements in their neighbourhood. Thank you to everyone involved with the project."*

We are working in partnership with other local agencies, such as the Street Warden from Forest of Dean District Council and the Police. If this pilot project proves successful, we plan to involve other schools.

Spring 2014

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**Pay your rent by Direct Debit
and win cash!**

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www.tworivershousing.org.uk

CLOCKS GO FORWARD

Are you finding your Two Rivers calendar useful? We hope it's helping you to keep track of appointments.

A production error has come to light and we wanted to let you know, in plenty of time, that you need to put your clocks

FORWARD by one hour on Sunday 30 March – not back, as the calendar suggests.

So, I'm afraid you'll lose an hour in bed, but you will have the lighter evenings, and the prospect of summer, to look forward to.



FANCY OWNING YOUR OWN HOME?

Two exciting brand new housing schemes will soon be ready, giving you the chance to part-own your own home.

You need a household income of less than £60,000 per year, not own any other property and be able to prove you can afford the payments. But if you can do all that, you will be given priority as a Two Rivers tenant to buy a share of one of these homes.

- Pylers Way, Lydney.

We have two 3-bedroom houses and one 2-bedroom house available for Shared Ownership. Prices start at £59,000 for a 40% share. To apply, please register with South West Homes - www.southwesthomes.org.uk.

- Ivy House Lane, Gorsley.

We have two 3-bedroom houses and two 2-bedroom houses available for Shared Ownership. Prices start at £51,250 for a 25% share. To apply, please register with Orbit Help to Buy - www.orbithelptobuy.co.uk. Please note, you must be able to prove a local connection.

The Shared Ownership homes in Sedbury proved popular and sold very quickly so, if you're interested, we recommend you register without delay.



An architect's drawing of one of the homes in Gorsley.

Tenants who used to rent their home from the Forest of Dean District Council may be eligible to purchase their home under the Right to Buy or the Right to Acquire scheme. The booklet on our website – www.tworivershousing.org.uk/rtbinfo - will tell you more.

If you would like to know more about Shared Ownership or Right to Buy/Right to Acquire, please call our Home Ownership team on **0800 316 0897**.

HOW BAZAAR!

The most recent fundraising exploits by those amazing people down at Parkside in Coleford have netted another £1,300 for their social fund.

Lots of baking and making and collecting and promoting went on in advance, followed by loads of selling and spending on the day!

HISTORY IS UNEARTHED

Historical documents dating back nearly a century have been uncovered showing tenants in the 1930s didn't want electricity installed, homes came with a scullery and the average rent was six shillings a week.

The folder full of old tenancy agreements, letters, plans and drawings were discovered while packing for our move to Newent.

Most documents relate to the former Rural District Council of West Dean. They show that mains water supplies were introduced during the 30s and there's a postcard dated 1938 asking a Coleford tenant if he would like electricity installed – to which he replied “no”!

We also found a tenancy agreement for the Great-Great Uncle of Lauren Hatton, our very own Executive PA Apprentice.



Lauren Hatton, Jasmine Ellicott and Denise Voyce look back at housing early in the last century.

The hand-drawn plans dated 1920 and 1930 show developments in Lydney which were rather different from those we produce today as the houses were built with a scullery, larder, parlour and an area to the side to store fuel.

All the houses and tenants are recorded in a large ledger which only stopped being used

in 2005, when records were transferred onto computer.

Denise Voyce, our Lettings Coordinator, remembers filling in the book each week: “I would have to use a special key to add and remove pages. It's very interesting to look through, but I don't miss having to lug the heavy book around!” she said.

100 YEARS YOUNG!

Albert Piper, from Worrall Hill, had a very special birthday in February, as he reached 100 years old.

He commemorated becoming a centenarian at Forest Hill Golf Club where 35 of his friends and family gathered to help him celebrate. Other, more distant, well-wishers included HRH The Queen and the Secretary of State, both of whom sent cards.

Our Neighbourhood Housing Advisor Clive Wilce also paid Mr Piper a visit with a card and gift, to wish him a very happy day on behalf of everyone at Two Rivers.



Mr Piper is joined by Clive Wilce (left) and several generations of his family.

STUDENTS GO ON SITE



Students take their first steps on a building site.

First year plumbing students from Gloucestershire College took the first of many steps on a building site, when they visited our brand new housing development at Alvington.

Two houses and two flats are being built on the site and the students were shown various aspects of plumbing a home, including the positioning of pipes, radiators and hot water tanks.

Sean Nolan, a Lecturer at Gloucestershire College, said: *"This type of experience is invaluable as it gets the students out and about and gives them a chance to see how the things we teach them in the classroom work on a real building site."*

This was echoed by our Technical Officer, Tom Burford. *"It's great that we are able to provide on-site experience for students and apprentices,"* he said.

"We have building projects all over Gloucestershire and Herefordshire, so we are able to show them the work at different stages, and link tours to particular activities, such as bricklaying, plumbing or electrical works."

SONGS, FOOD AND CHEER

Residents at Penby Lawn in Newnham were treated to some singing by pupils of St Peter's Church of England School. After their performance, the children in years 3 and 4 shared a buffet with the residents.



LOANS PAY HOUSEHOLD BILLS

Hard-up families regularly take out loans to pay their bills and keep their heads above water. Most borrow from family and friends, but that comes with the embarrassment of asking for help.

An anonymous survey by local housing associations aimed to find out how people are coping and see what help might be provided.

Almost 150 of our tenants took part and half said they borrow money. 15 borrow at least once a month, 33 ask for help several times a year and 28 people do so annually. Almost two-thirds use it to pay bills, whilst a third cover one-off expenses, such as a new fridge.

Three-quarters borrow from friends or family, but 23% used a doorstep lender or payday loan company. One person admitted using a loan shark.

Interest rates are generally less than 30%, but nine people paid up to 200%, and three were charged up to 3,000%.

Garry King, our Chief Executive, said: *"Most people surveyed are taking out loans to pay their bills, and many are doing so every month. This is a real concern as they are not coping on their income and regularly need extra cash, just to get by."*

INTO THE TOP 100

Two Rivers is officially one of the top organisations to work for in the whole country.

This fantastic news comes after we marched our way into the prestigious Sunday Times list of Top 100 Best Companies – at our very first attempt.

The list brings together companies of all sectors and we joined the list of not-for-profit organisations at number 82.

The news comes just months after we won an award for our commitment to training and apprenticeships.

Staff filled in an anonymous survey rating their satisfaction with, among other things, leadership, development, opportunities to influence and how well appreciated they feel.

"I am absolutely delighted by this result," said Garry King, Chief Executive. "We aim to make Two Rivers a great place to work because, if our staff are happy and fulfilled in their jobs, they will deliver a better service for our customers."



BIDDING FOR A HOME

Many of us get itchy feet at this time of year and think a new home could be the answer.

If you fancy a change of scene, you need to start looking for your new nest through Gloucestershire Homeseeker, where all housing associations and local authorities in the county advertise their affordable properties for rent.

There are five key steps to the bidding process:

1. Register on the website – www.gloshomeseeker.co.uk - or find the Gloucestershire Homeseeker channel on your digital TV.
2. You will be banded according to your housing need and priority.
3. View the available properties and decide which ones you like.



A home like this could be yours, if you make a bid

4. Make up to three bids per week, by phone, by text message or online.
5. When the closing date has passed, the property will be

offered to the applicant with the highest priority who has been waiting the longest and meets the criteria in the advert.

If your bid is successful, you will be contacted to arrange a viewing, and hopefully start planning your move.

A project led by our Resident Scrutiny Group revealed many people are confused by the process, and they want to help people through it.

If you are unsure about how to look for a new home on Gloucestershire Homeseeker, or you need help to go online and bid, just call our Customer Services team on **0800 316 0897** and they will be pleased to assist.

FRESHEN UP FOR SUMMER!



Mrs Heale lends Karl a hand to decorate her sitting room.

Spring is here and what could be better than a fresh lick of paint to spruce up our homes?

But if you don't have the time or you're not able to do it yourself, then you need to call on the highly-acclaimed services of our Handyperson Karl Bates.

Karl is in particular demand at this time of year for his decorating skills, and there are five options to choose from, according to the amount of assistance you need.

Alternatively, you may value his help outside, and his diary is already filling up with gardening

appointments – hedge and grass-cutting and general tidying up after the winter – and fitting outside taps ready for the summer.

Eunice Heale recently enlisted Karl's support to decorate her Ruardean sitting room. *"I'm grinning from ear to ear,"* she said as she admired the results. *"He was very good and I would definitely use him again."*

We launched HandypersonPlus last year in response to requests from our tenants. You provide the materials and we provide the labour in return for a modest charge.

If you would like to find out more about our HandypersonPlus service and charges, please call Customer Services on **0800 316 0897**.

BUILDING STRONGER COMMUNITIES

We want your community to be a safe place to live and we are working with other housing associations and local Police to try and achieve this.

Julia Watson, our Tenancy Compliance Officer, has been organising anti-social behaviour awareness coffee mornings in many of our schemes and talking to people to find out what we can do to help.

The first event, at Crawshay Place in Cinderford, was attended by our staff, representatives from Marches and Wyedean housing associations and Gloucestershire Police. It was a huge success and many of



Julia Watson and PCSO Dawn Teague at the first event in Cinderford

the ideas suggested during the morning have been taken forward, including a Police information point at the scheme

and regular coffee mornings with the Neighbourhood Housing Advisor.

Julia Watson said: *"The coffee mornings give local residents an opportunity to speak to us and the Police about any issues they might be having, or give us feedback which could help to improve their neighbourhoods."*

Since this first event, coffee mornings have now been held at St Barts in Newent and Western Way in Dymock. More are being planned, so look out for details about an event taking place near you soon, or call us on **0800 316 0897** to find out the dates.

CHANGES TO ALARMS

Residents in our HomePlus schemes will soon be asked to decide what, if any, emergency alarm service they would like in future.

Their homes are fitted with a cord they can pull in an emergency and an intercom to call for help, but cuts to the County Council budget mean most residents will lose any financial assistance they currently have from the Government to pay for this service.

As a result, we're taking the chance to provide information on the alternatives and their costs, and canvass opinion on what residents might like for the future.

Rachel Smith, Head of Housing, said: *"A high number of our residents value the alarm service, and many get help from the County Council towards the weekly cost. As this subsidy will be withdrawn later this year, we're taking the opportunity to check if they want to pay themselves to*

continue with the service or if they prefer to do something different."

All residents affected by the changes have received initial information on the options and further details will be provided shortly, along with a preference slip.

Anyone who has questions or wants to discuss the options should contact their Neighbourhood Assistant or call Customer Services on **0800 316 0897**.

A ROARING AFTERNOON!

Forest of Dean Lions laid on a magnificent Christmas spread for tenants at George Place in Berry Hill. Coupled with entertainment from keyboard maestro David Ward and local poet Dave Harvey – both of

whom live in Two Rivers' homes – they provided the recipe for an afternoon of fabulous festive fun!

Our sincere thanks go to the Lions and the two Daves!



POINSETTIA FOR PARKSIDE



Pupils from St John's C of E Academy with Parkside residents, and an array of colourful Poinsettia.

St John's C of E Academy in Coleford brought music to the ears of our Parkside residents – and a collection of Poinsettia pot plants, too!

The children, aged from seven to 11, sang a range of carols, and then presented the vibrant winter plants – won in a competition run by The Sun newspaper – to the appreciative tenants.

Jean Hughes, who has lived at Parkside for nine years said: *"The singing was lovely. It took me back to when I was at school. There are many of the same songs and it was good to have a sing-a-long."*

The plants are now in the care of some of the older tenants living at Parkside.

WE'RE A FRIENDLY BUNCH!

It turns out we, at Two Rivers, are a friendly bunch! A recent satisfaction survey showed 96% of respondents agree we have approachable staff.

Whilst we're obviously pleased to be regarded as friendly, it's important our service bears scrutiny, so it's good to know 85% of people who took part said they were satisfied with our service overall. This is the same as last year, so we have been consistent.

The anonymous survey covered areas including

customer service, communication and involvement and key services. Our thanks go to the 214 tenants who took part, helping us to learn what we do well, and where we need to improve.

We were pleased to see satisfaction with the overall quality of our homes has increased (88%) and with your neighbourhoods as a place to live (96%). Respondents also said we are good at keeping them informed about things which might affect them (89%), which is better than a year ago.

There are, of course, areas where residents are less happy with our performance than they were. For example, our repairs and maintenance service scored lower (down from 81% to 77%) and satisfaction with the final outcome of a resident's contact with us has fallen from 77% to 75%.

We are, therefore, looking at ways to improve, without taking our eye off the ball on other areas where we are doing well.

A PLACE WHERE RIVERS MEET

The packing crates have disappeared and we are settled into our bright, new energy-efficient office.

It is a lovely building which makes sound financial sense for us in the long term. From the day the office opened, we started cutting our bills as the energy-efficiency features swung into action.

A host of light, water and power-saving measures will reduce our running costs, which leaves more money to invest in services.



Rivers Meet generates power - and saves money - in the sun!

We've also created an external environment which will be particularly attractive when the trees, shrubs and plants are established, and offering food and sanctuary for wildlife. In fact, one of our bird boxes was in use before we even moved in!

All this adds up to the accreditation which makes us very proud. We are on course to have the first BREEAM 'Excellent' new-build office in

Gloucestershire, which means we have kept our environmental impact low.

We hope many of you will come and visit us at Rivers Meet and, if you don't need to call in for matters relating to your home, then you will take the opportunity to look around when we open our doors to tenants. We'll let you know more when we have a date.



This display panel in Reception gives instant information about how much energy is being generated by the photovoltaic panels on the roof.

GARAGES UNDER REVIEW

Since Two Rivers Housing was established 10 years ago, we've spent a lot of time and money getting our houses into a decent state of repair, but we've done little to review and improve our garages. That is, until now.

We have over 70 garage sites across Gloucestershire and Herefordshire and we are keen to improve many of them.

Mark Watson, our Technical Support Officer, has visited

all our garages and is putting together a programme of improvements, which we are hoping to start next year.

Mark said: *"We have listened to the tenants who rent garages from us and know a number of properties need work. This review allows us to do just that and is a major undertaking."*

Mark has been looking at more than just the garages; he has also been reviewing the



Typical Two Rivers garages which are covered by the review

forecourts and access roads. This includes making sure the areas around the garages are maintained.

HELP TO MANAGE YOUR MONEY

Our Welfare and Benefits Advisors have been extremely busy over the last 12 months, helping our tenants to manage their budgets and claim the benefits they're entitled to.

Becky James and Gwyn Yarlett have given their expert support to more than 250 of our tenants since April, and there are personal success stories from right across the patch.

Between them they have claimed back-dated Housing Benefit payments, negotiated Personal Independence Payments and Disability Living Allowances and set up budget plans to help tenants balance their income.

They have made applications to charities for one-off awards on behalf of tenants and, collectively, helped them to manage more than £130,000

We have helped tenants claim over £130,000 in benefits they were entitled to. Why not see if we can help you, too?

"Completed benefit check and advised what I was entitled to."

Support to make online benefit claims.

Helped to claim Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP).

"Contacted creditors and set up affordable payment plans."

"Helped to set up a payment plan for my rent arrears."

"Contacted the bailiffs and negotiated a payment plan."

worth of debt and claim a similar amount in benefits.

"Many of our tenants are really struggling to make ends meet," said Becky. "We want to help where we can and use our in-depth knowledge of the benefits system and home-budgeting to advise and make claims."



FEELING THE SQUEEZE?
Benefit and Debt Advice
Call 0800 316 0897



Helped to request and complete Personal Independence Payment.

Helped to complete Housing Benefit application and request backdate.

Helped to set up an affordable budget.

"Helped to claim Disability Living Allowance for my child, and Carers Allowance."

Helped to set up a payment plan for overpayment of Working Tax Credit.

"We can't promise success every time," said Gwyn, "but there's absolutely nothing to lose in asking for our help and we'll see what we can do."

Call our advisors on **0800 316 0897** or email **incomecollectionteam@2rh.org.uk**.

DON'T GET TRICKED!



The cast of Lakers School line-up before their curtain call.

Year eight students at Lakers School in Coleford gave their teacher a break when they decided to do the teaching.

The children wrote and performed 'Don't get tricked', and then treated our residents

at George Place in Coleford to the entertaining sketch show. They outlined the different ways in which the elderly can be fooled into giving away their money or letting people in to their homes, and warned them to be aware of scams and cold-callers.

The play was the brainchild of Police Community Support Officer (PCSO) Neil Evans, who noticed an increase in cold-callers tricking the elderly. He spoke to the students and they put together the sketches.

All Two Rivers Housing staff and our contractors, PH Jones, Hewers and Lakers, carry identification.

If you receive a visit from an unexpected caller who claims to be from Two Rivers Housing you can ask to see their ID card. If you are still uncertain, please call Customer Services on **0800 316 0897**. We'd rather you were safe than sorry.

BE IN IT, TO WIN IT

Ever wondered what you would do if your bills were covered for 12 months? Well, you could find out if you sign up to pay your rent the easy way – by Direct Debit.

The Big Break initiative encourages people to switch to the convenience of Direct Debit, and one lucky person will scoop £12,000 in a prize draw - enough to cover regular bills for a year!

We will also make a donation to Gloucestershire Young Carers charity for each new instruction set-up through the campaign.

So, bill-paying is easier, you help a local charity and you have the chance to win cash. What's not to like?!

Direct Debit is a simple and easy way to pay regular bills, such as your rent or service charge. Payments are taken automatically so you don't have to worry about forgetting.

To be in with a chance of winning, simply call Customer Services on **0800 316 0897** before 30 June 2014 and ask to pay your rent by Direct Debit.

For further information go to **www.thebigbreak.co.uk**.



And finally, we will give £30 cash to every single one of our tenants who signs up to pay their rent by Direct Debit for the first time. We will also enter all tenants who pay their rent by Direct Debit continuously for a year or more, into an annual draw for vouchers.

It all makes perfect sense, so why not give us a call?



JOBS FOR OUR TENANTS

Meet Kirsty Hambrey and Jason Bennett, the first of our tenants to secure jobs in a brand new Two Rivers enterprise.

Centigen Facilities Management is a subsidiary of Two Rivers, and its first venture is to provide cleaning at our office – saving money on the service previously provided by an external contractor.

This is just the first step for Centigen, which has its sights set on delivering other services that Two Rivers currently pays external contractors to provide, and ultimately to deliver business support services to a range of other organisations.

The aim is to cut costs, make savings, take greater control of quality, offer opportunities for employment and generate



Jason and Kirsty join Centigen and keep the new Two Rivers office looking spick and span.

additional income, as Centigen will gift its profits to Two Rivers. This will raise more money for us to invest in our residents, their homes and the wider community, which is essential to replace central Government funds which are being cut.

"If we didn't take action, it would be increasingly difficult to find the money to make improvements," explained Chief Executive Garry

King. *"We have to think creatively to survive and this new venture gives us greater confidence we will be able to continue providing homes people can afford, for generations to come."*

"It's also great to be able to provide jobs, and I'm delighted these first two posts have gone to our tenants Kirsty and Jason."

ALL GEARED UP

Two Rivers staff showed their support for a local homeless charity by donating items to Gloucestershire Emergency Accommodation Resource (GEAR) Projects over the festive season.

For the few weeks leading up to Christmas, a donation box left in the kitchen at the Two Rivers office started filling up until it was overflowing with contributions of food, toiletries and clothing. Santa's little helper (known as Carly, our Customer Services

Co-ordinator, at other times of the year) struggled under the weight of all our offerings for this worthy cause.

GEAR Projects, based in Gloucester, offers a 'one-stop facility' for people in the county who are homeless or vulnerable. It provides support and advice, as well as medical services, skills training and a safe, secure and nurturing environment for homeless people.



For more information about GEAR see www.gearprojects.org.

CINEMA EVENTS ENJOYED BY ALL

Young and old enjoyed Christmas treats courtesy of Two Rivers when we laid on free cinema events.

Nearly 60 HomePlus tenants tucked into mince pies and watched the film, 'One Chance' at the Palace cinema in Cinderford – one of the oldest picture houses in the country.

Things got chilly for our younger residents, when nearly 150 children munched popcorn and enjoyed the hit Disney film 'Frozen' at The Studio cinema in Coleford.

Santa also made an appearance and they were able to meet the man himself after the film, whisper their Christmas wishes and take away a goody bag.



Santa's deputy, AKA Neighbourhood Assistant Gina Facchiano, with Brianna (5).

Stephanie Oversby from Drybrook attended the event with her two granddaughters. "The film was amazing," she said. "The girls loved the film and they loved seeing Santa too. It was such a treat!"

Emma Towler, our Community Involvement Officer said: "We like to treat our tenants at Christmas and do something a bit special. Everyone seems to enjoy the films and it was great to add the HomePlus event this year. It definitely got everyone into the festive spirit!"



Ready for curtain-up at the HomePlus event in Cinderford.

A NEW TWO RIVERS WEBSITE

A brand new website is being developed for Two Rivers, giving users access to more information and increasing 'self-service' functionality, so they can take greater control of matters relating to their tenancy.

It will be compatible with smartphones and tablets, making it convenient to the

greatest number of people, providing information to their fingertips at a time, and in a place, where they want it.

In a rapidly-changing world where instant access and personalisation are key, our current site lags behind. It's also not as easy to use or to find information as we would like, so we need to build something new.

We have enlisted the support of a group of our tenants to represent the users and to make sure the site does what we, and they, need it to. They will help to choose the design and give it a thorough test prior to launch, to make sure it works properly.

We intend the new site will be complete before the end of the year.

Contact us:

If you want this in large print, on audio CD or in another language.

Freephone 0800 316 0897 for landline Or lower cost 0300 100 0896 for mobile users.

Join the Two Rivers community on



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