

Tenant Topics

Newsletter for
Two Rivers Housing
Tenants



Summer 2014

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ROLL UP, ROLL UP!
COME AND SEE US AT OUR
NEW OFFICE, RIVERS MEET!

FREE
gift!

Saturday 19 July
11am - 2pm

FREE
day
out!

We have planned a day of fun for all the family at our office in Newent.

ATTRACTIONS INCLUDE:

- Circus skills workshop
- Herb and vegetable growing demonstrations
- Office tours
- Tips for saving money and cutting fuel bills
- Flower arranging on a budget
- Advice on budgeting, education and jobs

And of course, it wouldn't be a proper event without free food and drink and a gift to take away!

RSVP

If you would like to come to our Open Day, please email customerservices@2rh.org.uk or call Customer Services on 0800 316 0897 to reserve your family's place. It's not to be missed!

We may be able to help with transport costs under certain circumstances. Please let us know if you require this assistance.



MORE HOMES NEEDED

Demand for homes outstrips supply across the whole of Gloucestershire and, with house prices 11 times people's average earnings – and rising – there's not much optimism for those hoping to buy.

Renting and Shared Ownership are, therefore, increasingly important options, but the pressure is on to have enough homes for everyone who needs them – at prices they can afford.*

A recent meeting at our offices brought local housing experts together to discuss the future of housing in the county and to see what could be done to help the 17,000 people currently on the waiting list. We were joined by Forest MP Mark Harper.

The discussion highlighted the need for people of all ages within communities to consider the type and size of housing that is needed and where it should be located.

A mix of homes for private rent, social rent, private ownership and Shared Ownership was believed necessary to keep a neighbourhood strong and balanced.

Everyone agreed it is critical for all services to work together when planning new developments as building homes has an impact on other amenities.

Health services, jobs, schools and transport need to be factored in to make sure all the services residents need are built in to the overall plan.

All food-for-thought for the future.

* *Two Rivers rent is, on average, 20% lower than the rent charged by private landlords.*



Garry King (far right) describes the area where Two Rivers has properties at the event to discuss the future of local housing. He is joined by Mark Harper MP (left) and Two Rivers' Chair David Garnett.

HELLO TO KAYLEIGH

We have recently welcomed a new Income Collection Advisor to Two Rivers.

Kayleigh Dade joined us in February and it's very likely that if you live in or around the Newent, Mitcheldean, Drybrook, Gloucester or Stroud area, you may have already said "hello!"

Kayleigh joins Emma Watkins, Lisa Finnegan and Simon Taylor to collect rent and provide support for your payments.

She has worked in the housing industry for five years and as a Rent Officer in Herefordshire for the last three years, so she certainly knows the ropes!

Our Income Collection team has grown over the last year and we also now have two Welfare and Debt Advisors, Rebecca James and Gwyn Yarlett, who are here to help you.

If you would like to book an appointment to see Rebecca or Gwyn, please email customerservices@2rh.org.uk or call us on **0800 316 0897**.



Kayleigh Dade, our new Income Collection Advisor.

KANE IS NOW ABLE!

Two Rivers has transformed the life of a young Cinderford family, offering new freedom to one of our junior residents.

Moving home can be exciting, but for Dean Ormond, Emma Davies and their children, Bethany-Jane (8), Kane (6) and two-year-old Bentley, the move to a bungalow has completely changed their lives.

Kane suffers from Cerebral Palsy, which means he struggles to move around and often uses a wheelchair. The family's previous house in Ruardean presented everyday challenges for Kane and his family, but moving to the Two Rivers bungalow in Cinderford has changed all that.

Kane can now move around the whole of the house, meaning



Neighbourhood Housing Advisor, Clive Wilce, (left) with Kane and his family (left to right: Kane, Emma, Bethany-Jane, Bentley and Dean).

he no longer has to wait for his parents to take him upstairs to the bathroom. The car port protects them when taking him in and out of the house, and he is able to move freely around the house to play with his siblings.

This summer, Kane will also be able to enjoy playing out in the

garden, which he was unable to do at their last home due to a four foot wall surrounding it.

Dean Ormond said: "It has been life-changing for us. Kane keeps saying, "This house is cool." He is so much happier in himself here and the house has just allowed him to act his age."

VIP VISITORS AT RIVERS MEET

Two of our oldest Newent tenants were among the first visitors to our new office to see how the project they helped to launch, turned out.

Bert Bullock (101) and Evelyn Adamson (94) (known as Peggy) first visited the site in October 2012 as building work got underway. Both said they would like to see how the mass of brick and metalwork had been transformed into a modern and attractive office, and it was our pleasure to show them around.

Chief Executive Garry King and Chair David Garnett welcomed

them, and Home Ownership Manager Jasmine Ellicott gave them a personal tour to show off the features that make it such an energy-efficient office.

"Bert and Peggy joined us at the start of this project, so it was great to be able to show them the result," said Garry.



Garry King (back left) and David Garnett (back right) welcome Peggy and Bert (front) and Bert's relatives, to Rivers Meet.

FLEXIBLE LIVING FOR THE FUTURE

Two Rivers is responding to increasing demand for smaller homes with an innovative and flexible design.

A new scheme of one-bedroom apartments in Stonehouse near Stroud is the first development where we've used this layout, which allows us to easily adapt the living space and add an extra bedroom if needed.

Changes to housing benefit has led to more demand for smaller homes. This has come from young people looking for their first home, and from others who want to down-size and cut their costs.

We are therefore looking to build more one-bedroom homes across the district, and this new design gives us the flexibility to alter the rooms if demand changes.



"We want to create spaces that allow people to live their lives to the full; not just small boxes," explained Matt Hunt, Director of Asset Management and Development.

"We also know how trends can change and we want to retain some flexibility with these apartments so we can adapt them to suit future needs – both for ourselves and for our customers. This offers a simple,

cost-effective solution that could guarantee their popularity for many years to come."

The Stonehouse apartments are being built on the site of a former bakery and should be ready to receive their first tenants by the end of this year. They will be available for affordable rent – a sum which is typically at least 20% lower than rents charged by the private sector.

HAPPY HOLIDAY!

This year's summer holiday for the Baldwin family has been paid for early, thanks to a surprise cash gift from Two Rivers Housing.

A £100 windfall came her way after Maria filled in the survey on the back of this year's Two Rivers calendar, and her form was entered into our free prize

draw. It only took her a few minutes, and now she and partner Shaun, seven-year-old Hollie and one-year-old Harley can look forward to their summer break, knowing their spending money is all they need.



Neighbourhood Housing Advisor Justine Skitt (left) celebrates Maria's win with Hollie and baby Harley.

"I never win anything," said Maria, who lives with her family in Lawdley Road, Coleford. "We're really looking forward to the break and it's great to be able to pay it off so early."

Our thanks go to everyone who took the trouble to respond to our survey. We are now planning this year's report and calendar and your feedback has been extremely helpful in deciding on how we do it.

TENANTS ENJOY A LIVELY DEBATE

The merits of open plan living versus separate rooms, and wetrooms rather than bathrooms were discussed by a group of 30 Two Rivers tenants.

Opinion was sometimes divided but that meant they enjoyed a healthy debate when we invited them to consider what they would want from a home if they were to think about down-sizing.

This was our latest attempt to involve tenants in helping us to shape future services and there were three topics under the microscope that evening: building smaller properties to help save tenants' money; grounds maintenance and cleaning; and access to our services out-of-hours and online.

They only had 20 minutes to discuss each of the three topics, but some really useful comments came out of the workshops, and a number of similar viewpoints which is particularly helpful.

Each of the tenants who gave up their evening to help us was

given a shopping voucher to thank them.

If you would like to get involved in future discussions about Two Rivers services, please contact Emma Towler on **0800 316 0897** or by email, emma.towler@2rh.org.uk.



Creative ideas start flowing as our tenants get stuck into a lively debate.

FREE TO GOOD HOMES

We're really keen on recycling at Two Rivers, so we're pleased to have found homes for some of our surplus furniture with local charities and community groups.

The items came to light as we tidied the office ready for moving and we decided to offer up those things we no longer needed.

So we contacted Forest Voluntary Action Forum (FVAF) in Cinderford, which was delighted to help out. The group took a few items for its office, a DVD player to loan to local groups and advertised

the other items through its network.

As a result, we have also been able to distribute furniture and office equipment to:

- Cinderford Methodist Church
- Forest of Dean Children's Opportunity Centre
- Forest of Dean Citizens' Advice Bureau
- Forest Pulse
- Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust
- Mount of Olives Church, Coleford

Jamie Coull, who co-ordinated the distribution, said: "We believe in recycling where we can and, as a charity ourselves, we are very committed to helping

others who need support. It's great to have found good homes for these items in the local community."

Pat Nixon, at FVAF said: "The DVD player will make a huge difference in the villages as it will vastly extend the range of events they can hold."



Jamie Coull (centre) delivers some of the items, helped by FVAF co-ordinators Tim Fretter and Pat Nixon.

FREE SUMMER FAMILY FUN

The days are longer and the sun is shining so it must be time for our summer events programme to begin!

Every year we like to treat you and your families to some summer fun and last year many of our residents enjoyed free football training, swimming and cycling.

This year we are holding four circus skills workshops where you can learn to juggle, spin a plate and walk on stilts. And to keep you fuelled when you're acting like a clown, there will be a barbeque, so you can munch



on some burgers and hot dogs whilst honing your skills!

The first free workshop will be part of our Open Day on Saturday 19 July (see the front page article for more information). The others will take place between 2pm and 4pm on:

- Thursday 24 July, at Sedbury Village Hall.
- Thursday 7 August, at Cinderford Rugby Club.
- Thursday 21 August, at Coleford's Coalway Recreation Ground.

There's no age limit and no need to book - just turn up on the day prepared to have some fun!

PUPILS GIVE SAFETY WARNING

Gorsley primary school children have designed colourful posters to decorate fences surrounding the site of one of our latest developments.

But they'll do more than just make the site look more attractive, as a serious safety message lies within their bright artwork, warning that building sites are dangerous places.

Gorsley Goffs Primary School is close to the 10 homes we are building at our Linton Wood Meadow scheme and the local contractor was keen to warn the children that it should not be seen as a play area.

A competition was launched to reinforce the message and our development expert Pete Lane joined Garry Godsall from J Harper and Sons to award prizes to the winners and runners-up during school assembly.



The winners and runners up with their entries and Garry Godsall (far left) and Pete Lane (far right)

The energy-efficient two and three bedroom houses are available for affordable rent and shared ownership, and priority is being given to people with local connections, giving young people the chance to stay in the rural community they know and contribute to its on-going prosperity. The first residents will move in this summer.

Kimberley Read, who is leading the project for Two Rivers said: "Homes in rural areas like Gorsley are often priced beyond the reach of people on lower incomes. These houses offer people a realistic chance of being able to afford to join a popular and thriving community, with the benefits this will bring to the village and area as a whole."

COURT COSTS INCREASE

Tenants who fail to pay their rent will face additional costs if we have to take them to court over the debt, following an increase in County Court fees.

The cost of a Possession Order has gone up from £100 to £250 (if applied for online) or from £175 to £280 if not. These charges will be added to the tenant's rent account, increasing the debt and the amount that needs to be repaid.

affordable payment plans. Please speak to your Income Collection Advisor at the earliest opportunity if you are struggling to pay your rent or, if you think you might not be receiving the correct benefits, book an appointment with our Welfare and Debt Advisors.

We don't like to take legal action against our tenants and we only do it as a last resort. However, it's not fair to the majority of our residents who do keep pace with their payments if we ignore those who run up debts.

Gwyn Yarlett and Rebecca James give one-to-one confidential guidance and, between them, they have helped our tenants to manage more than £130,000 worth of debt and claim a similar amount in benefits. They really can make a difference so call them on **0800 316 0897**.

If you are finding it hard to make your money stretch, we have experts who can help with advice on budgeting, claiming benefits and setting up



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

THE HEAT IS ON!

Summer is the perfect time to make sure heating systems are serviced and ready to work in the winter.

It is essential – and our legal responsibility – to service all solid fuel and gas appliances every 12 months. If they are not working efficiently, they can ultimately break down or give off deadly carbon monoxide fumes, known as 'the silent killer' because they are invisible and have no taste or smell.

We currently have a very good track-record of servicing heating appliances, but we are looking at ways to strengthen this even further and reduce

the amount of time wasted when our engineers turn up to appointments and are not able to get in to do their job.

Our Resident Scrutiny Group has been helping with this and we are exploring new ideas, including learning from the success of other housing associations across the country.

You can help us to help you by regularly testing your carbon monoxide detector and making sure you are available to let our engineers in when they call to service your appliance.

It wastes time and money if they turn up to an empty house, so

please let us know if you're not able to make the original appointment and we will arrange a more convenient date and time.



Service your heating system this summer to avoid a winter breakdown.

WE'VE BAGGED GOLD!

We've gone and done it again and bagged ourselves another Gold award – this time for health and safety.

The award is made by the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (RoSPA). Last year we picked up Silver, so we are absolutely delighted to have gone one better and secured the Gold.

The scheme looks at health and safety management systems and accident records, including leadership and workforce involvement practices, and the award reflects a huge amount of effort to put the necessary processes and procedures in place.

As a result, we can be confident in the safety measures we have to help

protect our staff, our contractors and our residents.

We have also re-confirmed our place in the top 3% of organisations for staff support and development, achieving the ultimate Investors in People 'Gold' standard for the second

time. "It is important for us to make Two Rivers a great place to work because, if our staff are fulfilled and happy in their jobs, they will deliver a better service for our customers," explained Jon Coe, Director of Customer Services.



Here's our RoSPA Gold award!

WHERE DO I...?

Ever needed advice, but been confused about who to turn to?

Well, help is at hand as more than 20 local organisations – including ourselves – have come up with a solution to make it much more simple in future.

The 'Advice Pathway' project will give each organisation basic knowledge of the services each other provides so they will know which is the best one to help. They will also know the right person to contact and be able to make a direct referral if the client wishes.

So, if you are already talking to someone from the District Council and want advice on managing your money, they will know to direct you to Becky and Gwyn at our office. And if they meet a tenant who needs support looking after a relative, they will know the name and number of the person at the Carers' Trust who can help.



A wide range of topics will be covered by all the agencies, such as money, housing, health, legal advice, transport and education.



Lynn Teague, Chief Executive at the Forest Citizens' Advice Bureau, which is co-ordinating the project with the Gloucestershire branch of Age UK, explained: "The vision for the project is that clients will be able to walk into a variety of venues in the Forest to gain access to advice, without the need to visit several agencies before they gain access to the services they need."

NEW GROUP TO SUPPORT YOU

A new step has been introduced into our complaints process which will involve our tenants in helping to resolve disputes.

The Designated Tenants Complaints Panel comprises five of our residents who have been trained to evaluate complaints when they reach a certain level, and hopefully find a resolution.

In 2011, the Localism Act changed the procedure which meant tenants would have to wait eight weeks after the internal complaints procedure had been exhausted, before they were allowed to take the matter to the Housing Ombudsman.

Now the complainant can choose to see a 'designated person' immediately – rather than waiting eight weeks – and

the complaint can be referred to the Ombudsman more quickly, if necessary. This designated person could be a councillor, an MP or the new panel.

You can see our compliments and complaints leaflet on our website or you can email us – **customerservices@2rh.org.uk** – or call **0800 316 0897** to ask for a copy.

“PLEASE SLOW DOWN”

Coleford's Junior Wardens have taken to the streets again, this time with a powerful message for drivers – “please slow down”.

Armed with a speed camera, and supported by our staff, the Police and the local Street Warden, pupils of St John's C of E Academy monitored the speed of passing motorists.

Those they felt were driving too fast were asked to pull over and the youngsters were able to tell the driver how their speeding made them feel, handing out mock tickets as a reminder.

This is the latest initiative by the Year 5 and 6 children who joined our Junior Warden scheme. Many of the students live in our homes, and they wanted to work



A speeding motorist is called over to speak to the Junior Wardens

together to improve their local community. Monthly activities since then have included street inspections, a survey of dog mess and a litter-pick in areas close to the school.

“The Junior Wardens pulled eight motorists over and asked them to consider slowing down,” explained Jane Cordier, our Community Projects Co-ordinator. “The drivers responded well and it was another good example of how young people can get involved with improving their community.”



PC Rob Dix and the Junior Wardens monitor the speed of drivers in Coleford.

HERE TO HELP

If you're concerned about any anti-social behaviour issues, our two Tenancy Compliance Officers may be able to help.



Andy and Julia can help to resolve your disputes

Julia Watson and Andy Larkin offer support with a wide range of issues including:

- Using a property for illegal purposes
- Racial and hate crimes harassment
- Threatening behaviour
- Vandalism
- Noise nuisance
- Nuisance from animals kept in a property

They have several techniques to deal with nuisance and anti-social behaviours, including:

- Written warnings
- Mediation

- Acceptable behaviour contracts or anti-social behaviour orders
- Injunctions (with the power of arrest if required)
- Demotion of tenancies
- Possession of property

If they are not able to help you directly, they will be able to put you in contact with other agencies which may be able to provide specialist support.

Call **0800 316 0897** and ask to speak to your Tenancy Compliance Officer.

CUT YOUR ENERGY BILLS

A group of Two Rivers tenants are taking part in a brand new trial, designed to reduce their household fuel bills.

Experts from Severn and Wye Energy Agency are visiting the homes of 50 of our tenants to see how much energy they use, and then suggesting ways to reduce it and save them money.

Tips might include using their heating system properly, fitting energy-saving lightbulbs and radiator panels, or simply not over-filling the kettle when making a cup of tea!

Mary Paddon from Coleford is among the first of our tenants to get involved. She said: "I was surprised by all the energy-saving devices you could get, such as the 'save-a-flush' bag and the radiator panels. I've learnt what habits I need to change to save me money."

Rising energy costs concern us all. We have invested heavily in improvements to our existing homes, such as insulation and modern heating systems, and all new houses are built with features to keep running costs down, as well as limiting the damage to our planet.

We also recommend shopping around amongst energy

suppliers to find the best deal. Check out **www.billscutter.com** (or call them on **0800 692 1111**) to compare prices and see where you can make savings.

Let's hope this project is successful, as we will offer it to more tenants, to help them put more money back in their pockets!



Radiator panels are helping Mary Paddon to keep her heating bills down.

TENANTS OPT FOR CHOICE

Two Rivers tenants who currently have an emergency alarm fitted in their homes have overwhelmingly decided they want the right to choose whether or not to have a similar system in future.

This was the clear message that came back when we asked our older and more vulnerable tenants if they wished to continue with their existing service, or if they would prefer the flexibility to do something different.

Cuts in the County Council budget mean most of the 1,100 residents who currently have the alarm will lose any financial assistance towards it, from this autumn. We already knew how important this service was to many of our tenants so we did some research on the options available and canvassed opinion on the alternatives.

Three out of four people replied and 66% of those selected the same option. We were really pleased so many people took

part as we were in no doubt about the view of the majority. Our thanks go to everyone who got involved.

The result is that the alarms will be removed later this year and each tenant will be able to decide if they wish to replace it with a new system or not.

Our HomePlus team will be available to help everyone affected in deciding what suits their personal circumstances.

FIT FOR A KING!

A fabulous new development is gradually unveiling in Cinderford, offering a mixture of homes for rent or Shared Ownership.

The first five local families moved in during March and, when complete in June next year, Two Rivers will own 37 of the energy-efficient properties at King's Lodge, just off Valley Road.

Kevin Kirby has moved into a three bedroom home with his wife Clare and three sons, Jacob (10), Joshua (9) and six-year-old Daniel.

"Our new home has given us so much more space, in a much better location," said Kevin. *"We now have a lovely garden and a safe street for our boys to play in."*



A glimpse inside one of the new homes at Cinderford.

The development launched with a ribbon-cutting ceremony, celebrating the transformation of the site from an unsightly abattoir building to much-needed properties. King's Lodge has 92 homes in total built by Kier Homes, ranging from one-bedroom apartments to four-bedroom family homes.

We would like to welcome all of our new residents and we hope your time in King's Lodge is very happy!



The first tenants are welcomed to their new homes at King's Lodge by Clive Wilce (far left) and Lisa Finnegan (far right) of Two Rivers.

SIZZLE SAFELY

If you're hoping for another sizzling summer, you're probably keen to fire up the barbeque.

If so, remember a few basic safety tips that will help you enjoy your al fresco dining experience time and again.

- Check your barbeque is in good condition.

- Stand it on solid, level ground, away from anything that could catch light. Keep a bucket of water nearby, just in case.
- Never use petrol, meths or other accelerant.
- Make sure the fire is out before leaving it, and don't move it until it's cooled.
- Never use a disposable barbeque inside a tent.



MAKE SURE YOU CLAIM

If you are facing hardship and struggling to pay your rent due to additional housing costs or reduced Housing Benefit, you could be eligible for a Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP).

Each year the council has money to help people who receive Housing Benefit, either as one-off or on-going payments, but the eligibility

criteria are very specific. You may be entitled to DHP if you have been affected by the loss of the spare bedroom subsidy and you are paying additional rent, or if you are moving and unable to afford removal costs.

DHP is not a long-term solution, but it could help tide you over for a short while. The council will decide if you qualify for the payment, how much you receive and how often.

If you have previously received DHP and believe you could be entitled to it again, you need to make sure you re-apply, especially if you are affected by the 'bedroom tax'.

For more information about DHP and to find out if you qualify, speak to one of our Welfare and Debt Advisors by calling **0800 316 0897**.

HISTORICAL RECORD

After reading our article 'History is unearthed' in the Spring Tenant Topics about the old documents and plans we found during our office move, Edna Reynolds from Parkside sent in an old rent card dated 1931 for us to see.

The card belonged to her father-in-law, who was the first tenant in the St Briavels home. Edna, 90, and her husband moved into the house after he passed away and she lived there for 60 years.



Edna (right) shows the rent card to her sister Jeanne, 85, who married Edna's husband's twin brother.

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  @TRHousing and 



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