

# Tenant Topics

Newsletter for  
Two Rivers Housing  
Tenants



## TWO RIVERS HELPED ME TURN MY LIFE AROUND



Roxanne, Phil, Cora and Oliver are grateful for the start given to them by Two Rivers.

A young Coleford woman has described Two Rivers as “a god-send” for helping to get her back on track after a series of disasters threw her life into chaos.

Six years ago Roxanne Blake found herself single, living in a supported hostel, with a baby on the way and wondering what the future held for them both. Then Two Rivers provided a “lifeline” in the form of a one-bedroom flat.

Now Roxanne is reunited with her partner Phil, they are both working and they are now living

in a brand new two-bedroom Two Rivers house with their five-year-old daughter Cora and the newest addition to the family, baby Oliver, who was born in February.

And she thanks Two Rivers for the part we had to play.

“That flat was a lifeline for me,” explains Roxanne (28). “I could not afford to rent privately but here I was with my baby in my first home, and it was in my name. That was really important for me.

## Spring 2015

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“Then I could not believe it when we were offered this house. It's brand new, it's lovely and we're so happy. We could never afford to rent somewhere like this privately. We would probably have struggled to get a one-bedroom flat on our wages.

“Two Rivers has been an absolute god-send for me and my family, and helped me to turn my life around.”

Roxanne is helping to support the national Homes for Britain campaign. Find out more on page 7.

**Have you tried our new 'call back' feature?**

**See back page**



[www.tworivershousing.org.uk](http://www.tworivershousing.org.uk)

# HOMES ON THE GO!

Gloucestershire Homeseeker's website has been upgraded so that it now works on smartphones and tablets.

Once registered at [www.gloshomeseeker.co.uk](http://www.gloshomeseeker.co.uk) you can fill in an application, view

properties and place bids through the new site.

Alternatively, you can place bids via text or by using a telephone bidding line. The new number for this is **0300 666 6330**, which means mobile phone users will only be charged at a local rate.



For more information, go to [www.gloshomeseeker.co.uk](http://www.gloshomeseeker.co.uk) or, if you do not have internet access, call our Customer Service team on **0800 316 0897**.

## FLYING COLOURS

You can be safe in the knowledge that we're top notch when it comes to gas safety.

We passed our safety audit with flying colours, which means that our servicing processes are well-managed and meet regulations, helping to keep you safe.

Our Gas Servicing Co-ordinator, Kate Fellows has done a fantastic job making sure the work is done. She said: *"It's important appliances are checked annually, not only to keep us compliant, but to prevent risks to any of our tenants."*

We are required to maintain and service our 2,437 gas

appliances every year, which PH Jones does on our behalf.

When your boiler is due for service, PH Jones will book an appointment with you. Please ensure you, a family member over 16 or a neighbour can let them in to do the safety check. If the appointment is continually missed, your gas supply may be capped off.

## STILL THE TOPS!

Last year we were thrilled to join the list of Top 100 not-for-profit organisations in the country to work for, making our entrance at a credible 82nd position.

This year we've done even better, and crept our way up the rankings to number 65, earning our place amongst national charities, health organisations and other housing associations.

*"An improved ranking is the icing on the cake,"* said Chief Executive Garry King.

Feedback from last year's survey is being used to make the organisation an even better place to work.



Proudly collecting our Top 100 award from Nick Rodrigues, Editor of The Sunday Times Best Companies supplement are Jon Coe, Director of Customer Services, Garry King, Chief Executive and Barry Thompson, Director of Resources.

# JAN AND STEVE ARE **BUSY BEES!**

Most of us will be pleased to see the back of this cold winter, but Jan and Steve Wilson are looking forward to summer more than most.

For the Coleford pair are gearing up for their third season of keeping bees – and hoping to increase their current tally of over 100,000!

Jan and Steve had long dreamt of keeping their own bees, then

Steve built a hive and lured a swarm of bees in. Keen to learn about their new hobby, they joined the Dean Forest Beekeepers group in Lydney – not realising how soon they would need advice.

Steve was just leaving to attend his second session when a swarm of bees arrived and attached themselves to the outside of the hive.



*Jan and Steve hope their hives will soon be buzzing!*

Steve explains: “I asked the other beekeepers and they said I should just scoop the swarm up into a cardboard box! When I came home that evening, it appeared as if the swarm had flown off, but next morning I discovered the two swarms had actually amalgamated!”

This hive now has around 80,000 bees and another hive in their neighbour’s garden has an extra 20,000 bees. With some warm weather just around the corner, our beekeeping residents are ‘buzzing’ with the prospect of some honey this year!



*Steve with just a few thousand of their bees!*

## PHONES KEEP TEAM **ON THE MOVE**

Our repairs operatives have been kitted out with some new technology which means they can spend more time fixing repairs.

The smartphones will know what work they’ve done and the materials used, and will send a message to the

builder’s merchant to order replacements – so that they’re ready and waiting for collection.

The operatives will also be able to view photos of the jobs they’re going to go to, open and send documents and use Skype to communicate with the office if they need to.

These new phones are much more user-friendly than the Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs) that they used before, and they have extra functions too – all of which means the operatives can input and access information quicker, move onto their next job sooner and spend less time on wasted journeys.

# HELPING TO RESTORE PEACE

The quality of the home we live in is important, but the behaviour of the people who live around us is just as crucial to our happiness.

Thankfully, our two Tenancy Compliance Officers (TCOs) have a great track-record in dealing with nuisance behaviour – whether it's caused by our tenants, or experienced by them.

Julia and Andy successfully applied for nine injunctions last year to stop problems such as verbal, abusive, threatening and drunken behaviour, street fighting, drug issues and loud music.

Five of these had 'power of arrest' attached, meaning the

offender could go to prison if they do it again, and one tenant could lose their home.

As a result, the neighbourhood calm is restored and, in one case, children can play outside again.

Not everything needs to go to court and we work closely with many agencies to find alternatives. As a result, our TCOs have achieved 13 Acceptable Behaviour Agreements and six Acceptable Behaviour Contracts to resolve disputes and nuisance.

They have also used Restorative Justice and mediation six times to remedy noise complaints, boundary issues and pet behaviour.



*Andy and Julia are here to help resolve disputes and restore calm to our neighbourhoods.*

We want our communities to be happy and contented places to live and our TCOs are here to help achieve that. If you have an issue you think they could help you with, please contact them by email – **asb@2rh.org.uk** – or phone **0800 316 0897**.

# WEBSITE PREPARES FOR LAUNCH

The finishing touches are being made to the new Two Rivers website as we prepare for an April launch.

Some tenants had a sneak preview when they came to the office to review progress. They looked at the site as a whole and took an in-depth look at

the secure area where tenants can view information about their property, see their repairs history, find out when their home is due for upgrade and pay their rent.

They were very supportive, but also suggested things we could strengthen and new ideas for the future. They have also helped to test the new site before it goes live.

Our website should continue to evolve so please take a look (**[www.tworivershousing.org.uk](http://www.tworivershousing.org.uk)**) and let us know – via the online feedback form – how we could improve the information and services available.



*A group of tenants came to review the site and give us their thoughts.*

# PREPARE NOW FOR UNIVERSAL CREDIT

Universal Credit is a new benefit being introduced in stages for working age people between 2013 and 2017.

It replaces:

- Income-based Jobseeker's Allowance
- Income-related Employment and Support Allowance
- Income Support
- Child Tax Credit
- Working Tax Credit
- Housing Benefit

It will affect new claims for single people who would have otherwise been eligible for Jobseeker's Allowance. The provisional dates for the roll-out are:

- Herefordshire - between February and April 2015
- Gloucester, Forest of Dean and Stroud - between May and July 2015

Universal Credit changes will not affect current benefit claimants. The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) will tell you when it does.

Even if you are not currently eligible for Universal Credit, it's a good idea to prepare for when you are, eg if you become unemployed.



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

- Universal Credit must be claimed online, so find out where you can get access to the internet.
- If you don't have a bank or Post Office account, you'll need to open one to receive payments. The best account should allow you to make payments by Direct Debit.
- Universal Credit will be paid monthly so think how you will budget for this.
- Your Universal Credit payment may include help with rent, which means you will be responsible for paying your rent. Contact us when you know you will be claiming Universal Credit and discuss the best way to do this.

Visit <http://ucpp.dwp.gov.uk/universal-credit-preparation/> to see if there are any other changes you could make to prepare.

## FISH 'N' CHIP TREAT!

Who doesn't enjoy a plate of traditional fish 'n' chips?

Certainly there were no complaints from the residents of Rowandean, Coomb Drive or Penby Lawn recently, when Neighbourhood Housing Advisors Gina Facchiano and Paul Bodkin laid on special lunches for them, rounded off with equally traditional apple or rhubarb pie and custard.



*Residents of Rowandean tuck into their fish and chip treat.*

## MEET DAVID - OUR NEW CHAIR

David Powell is the new man at the helm of our Board and we're lucky to have his extensive knowledge and enthusiasm to help steer us forward.

David is a Chartered Accountant with more than 25 years of local government experience under his belt. He's worked in a variety of roles and departments, such as education, finance and social services, and is now Strategic Director at Powys County Council.

David is keen to build on the work of his predecessor and



*Our new Chair, David Powell.*

wants us to continue to be innovative in our approach to providing quality housing. He will make sure we continue listening

to your views, improving and delivering a quality service.

- The Two Rivers Board recently slimmed down to nine members, including David. Last year we asked all 3,800 tenants for their views on a proposal to reduce the number of tenant representatives from four to two. Our thanks go to the four people who responded.

The Board considered the arguments for and against and agreed there should be two tenant representatives in future. They are Colin Lumsden and Gill Robins.

## THE HEIGHT OF FLEXIBLE LIVING

An innovative design for flexible living has been showcased at our newest homes, making the layout easy to adapt as people's needs change.

The 'flexi-flats' offer a larger-than-average living area as a one-bedroom flat, but allow sufficient room to add a second bedroom with minimal disruption, if the need arises.

We've taken this step in response to current high demand for one-bedroom homes, but it means they can be easily adapted if two-bedroom flats become more popular.



*Councillors Chris Brine and Mattie Ross join Garry King (Two Rivers Chief Executive), Jason Wasley (Aqua Construction), Richard Draper (Aqua Construction) and John Bloxsom (Vice-Chair of Two Rivers) at the opening of our first 'flexi-flats'.*

A total of 11 flats have been built behind Stonehouse High Street, and six are the more generous flexi-one bedroom design. The remaining five are a standard one bedroom size.

*"This is fabulous!" said Mayor of Stonehouse, Cllr Chris Brine. "They are great news for young people who want to leave home and live independently. They are a generous size, I love their energy-efficiency features and they are right in the centre of town, on the bus route and close to the station. I am really impressed. We need to build more homes like these."*

# BECOME A PROPERTY INSPECTOR

Do you have an eye for detail? Do you know what makes a house a home? Would you like to help your neighbours and community?

We are looking for tenants to join our supervisors to inspect the condition of our empty properties and help decide

what work is needed to get them ready for new residents.

Once any work is complete, you can decide whether the property is up-to-scratch and suitable for a new tenant to move in.

We are looking for volunteers in all the areas we cover who can spare a few hours of their time.

Each visit will take around half-an-hour, and you can do just one property or several.

If you are interested in becoming an Empty Property Inspector, please contact Remco Kroese, our Head of Contract Services, by calling **0800 316 0897** or email **remco.kroese@2rh.org.uk**.

## THE KEY TO OUR HOUSING FUTURE

If you spotted a giant key being carried through the Forest a few weeks ago, you weren't seeing things.

You'd just come across Two Rivers taking part in a national campaign relay to raise awareness of the shortage of affordable homes in this country.



David Powell, Simon Taylor, Garry King, Karen Beard and Simon Wheeler-Jones take possession of the key at the Severn Bridge.



Two Rivers staff give the cycling team a good send-off as the key starts the final leg of its journey.

We've joined the Homes for Britain call for the next government to publish a long-term plan for providing enough affordable homes to meet demand. We brought the message to Gloucestershire by carrying the key-shaped baton from the Severn Bridge to Tewkesbury by van, bike and on foot.

"You can't over-estimate the value of an affordable, warm and secure home," said Garry King, our Chief Executive. "It's a place

to put down roots, a sense of belonging and security around which to build the rest of your life."

"We can give people the help they need and at a price they can afford, but it desperately needs the support of our politicians."

If you agree there need to be more affordable homes, lobby your local politicians and vote for the party which puts the issue high on its election agenda. Find out more at <http://homesforbritain.org.uk/>.

# CHIMNEY SWEEP ON THE WAY!

Your fireplace and stove has helped keep you warm over the winter, but now it's time to give it a well-earned rest and reward it with a clean!

Our solid fuel servicing programme starts in April and we will be writing to you to make an appointment to prepare your chimney so that it's spick and span and ready for use next winter.

Most of the work will be done by Stoves & Flues Ltd, a family-run Lydney company. PH Jones' solid fuel engineers are still on the patch, and may well visit for repairs and the occasional chimney sweep, too.

Remember to always use smokeless coal and seasoned timber on your stove.

Although more expensive to buy, smokeless coal generates more heat and burns for longer than regular house coal, so will actually be more economical in the long-run.

If you have any queries about the fuel you are using or the

best way to get the most out of your appliance, please email **customerservices@2rh.org.uk** or call us on **0800 316 0897**.

Alternatively, speak to Andy or Richard from Stoves & Flues when they visit this summer.



## STAY SAFE IN YOUR HOME

If you live alone, have mental health issues, you smoke, drink alcohol or take drugs or medication, then you're at risk of dying in a house fire.

And the odds stack even higher if you have walking difficulties or poor housekeeping habits, such as hoarding.

Five local people who died in house fires recently fell into these categories, and we have joined forces with Gloucestershire Fire and Rescue Service to help keep vulnerable people safe.

We have been trained to spot the warning signs and we know there are some items – such as fire-retardant bedding and cooker alarms – that can be provided to those at greatest risk.

The fire service will assess the fire risk in your home for free and your Housing Advisor can arrange a visit if you'd like one. Alternatively, you can arrange a visit directly with the fire service by calling **0800 180 4140** or complete the form online at **www.glosfire.gov.uk**.

- Smoke alarms are the best early warning system available. Test them weekly to make sure they're working properly – just in case you need them.



*Smoke alarms are life-savers, so test them regularly.*

# WE'RE COMMITTED TO NATURE

Our commitment to nature and forward-thinking approach to green innovations have been recognised in an award from Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust.

We're delighted with this as we put a lot of effort into building energy-efficient homes, using and conserving natural resources, supporting wildlife and protecting the landscape over the years.

Specific initiatives include minimising the distances travelled by using local suppliers and

materials, building a sustainable office, relocating protected species when we're preparing for development and equipping our staff with mobile devices to reduce the amount of time spent driving to and from the office.

*"We live and work in a beautiful part of the country which only serves to emphasise the importance of preserving it where we can,"* explained Chief Executive Garry King.

*"We need to build more homes to address the national housing*

*shortage but, if we can do our bit to meet demand and do it sensitively, then we have a way forward which should have lasting benefits."*



Development Manager Kimberley Read, with the Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust award.

# TWO RIVERS STAFF GO BACK TO SCHOOL!

Our staff have been going back to the classroom in a new initiative designed to extend our support into the wider community.

A group of volunteers are visiting St John's C of E Academy in Coleford one afternoon each

week to listen to Key Stage One and Two children practice their reading.

Jon Coe, our Director of Customer Service explained. *"It seems like such a simple thing to offer but we give the school some regular*

*support and put something extra back into the local neighbourhood and do more than just provide homes."*

Julie Griffiths, Vice-Principal at St John's, said: *"It is very important that young children read aloud to help them make progress in their reading, and we would like to thank the staff at Two Rivers for giving us their time."*



Karen Beard helps one of the St John's pupils with his reading.

Karen Beard, our Income Collection Co-ordinator, was among the first to be involved. *"I have thoroughly enjoyed getting to know the children,"* she said. *"It's so rewarding to listen to them reading."*

This is a pilot project at St John's and will be offered to other schools if it proves to be successful.

# LOAN WAS A “LIFELINE”

Do you need new school uniforms, furniture or a washing machine but wondering how you're going to pay for it?

If you need to borrow money to get through a short-term cash shortage, you might consider a National Housing Federation scheme called My Home Finance.

My Home Finance has been helping housing association tenants with affordable loans since 2010, preventing them from borrowing money they can't afford to repay.

Benefits are counted as income and each applicant is assessed to make sure they can afford to repay the loan. The loan is paid into a bank account and repayments are collected by Direct Debit.



The service offers an affordable alternative to payday and doorstep loans. A £300 loan from My Home Finance could cost up to £160 less than a doorstep loan.

Peter Wilson says it gave him “a financial lifeline.” He said: “If it had not been available, I am sure I would have had to resort to a payday loan or worse.”

“My Home Finance saved me from ending up on the payday loan treadmill.”

We are working with My Home Finance to make sure our residents have choices when they want to access short-term, affordable lending.

If you would like more information, please call **01905 25805** or visit **www.myhomefinance.org.uk**.

# SEDBURY'S SPICK AND SPAN!

Sedbury is looking spick and span after a group of local people took to the streets to make the town sparkle!

Residents and students from Wyedean School joined forces with our staff and Forest of Dean District Council Street Wardens for the Sedbury Clean-up Action

day, to tidy the town and bring the community together.

Grounds maintenance operatives from our subsidiary company, Centigen Facilities Management, were also on hand, helping out with the bigger jobs such as cutting hedges and removing overgrown brambles.



Our Neighbourhood Housing Advisor George Ehoro gets stuck into the challenge.



Sedbury is a much tidier place, thanks to this enthusiastic group of volunteers.

Two skips helped residents to get rid of larger items from their garages, sheds and gardens.

Shazia Sheikh, our Neighbourhood Housing Advisor said: “It was great to see the community pull together to help clean up the area. The rain held off and, although it was a bit chilly to start with, we all warmed up when we got going.”

# GIVE YOURSELF A BIG BREAK

Do you pay your rent by Direct Debit? If not, this could be the time to make the switch – and you could win a fabulous prize!

The Big Break initiative offers a free prize draw to anyone signing up before 30 October 2015 and the reward is huge – the chance to win one of five £1,000 Love-2-Shop vouchers.

Direct Debit is so simple to set up, and it means your regular bills are automatically paid on the date you choose – either the 1st, 8th, 15th or 22nd of each month – without you having to think about it again.

If this sounds too good to miss, simply call our Customer Service team on **0800 316 0897**, ask to

pay your rent by Direct Debit and they'll sort it all out for you.

It couldn't be easier!



# SAVE ENERGY AND SAVE MONEY!

Installing energy-saving devices, turning off appliances and switching suppliers can not only help the planet, but save money too!

This is what 50 of our tenants did in a trial designed to help them cut their fuel bills.

Experts from Severn and Wye Energy Agency (SWEA) showed them how to calculate how much energy they used and checked to see if there was any obvious wastage. Then they produced a personal report detailing how to use less energy and installed some energy-saving devices,

such as lightbulbs, radiator panels and plug-in timers.

On average, the households saved £20 a year which might not seem like much, but another £200 could be saved if more of the suggestions are followed – and best of all, they're free!



Mary Paddon of Coleford was one of our tenants to benefit from the trial.

SWEA's top tips for cutting fuel bills are:

- Check your energy supplier is right for you. Go to **www.uswitch.com** or call Freephone **0300 123 1234** to find out.
- Understand how to use your heating controls and use a timer to programme when your heating switches on and off.
- Turn appliances and lights off when not in use. You could save £30 a year by turning off appliances left on standby.

Check **www.energysavingtrust.org.uk** for more information.

# WE WON'T LEAVE YOU HANGING ON

Waiting in a queue can be a maddening experience, but you don't have to hang on the telephone any longer when you call us.

We've introduced a new 'call back' feature which means that if you ring our main 0800 or 0300 numbers and find the line busy, you can choose to stay holding on, or you can leave a number for us to call you back.

And if you put the phone down and wait for us to call, you'll keep your position in the queue.

This latest development follows hot-on-the-heels of our texting service which uses technology to streamline services and makes it easier for us to stay in touch. It is already available to telephone callers and, it will

also be possible to book a 'call back' online when our brand new website launches.

Jon Coe, Director of Customer Services explained: "We have relied on face-to-face and telephone contact for a long

*time and, whilst they're still very important to us and preferred by many people, there are other things we can do to keep in touch with people – and in ways that fit in better with their busy lives."*



Carly and the Customer Service team won't leave you hanging on the telephone

## TREATS AT THE FLICKS



The Freeman-Skinner family gets into the festive spirit with Clive Wilce, our Neighbourhood Housing Advisor.

Our free Christmas cinema events were a big hit again this year, with people of all ages.

The Penguins of Madagascar was a popular choice at the Studio cinema in Coleford, leaving the audience in fits of giggles watching their heroes trying to stop the villainous Dr Octavius. Father Christmas also turned up with gifts for the children.

Our HomePlus event was held at the Palace cinema in Cinderford. Guests were greeted with Christmas music, mince pies, tea and coffee and then laughed their way through the British comedy 'What We Did on Our Holiday' with David Tennant and Billy Connolly.

Hopefully, we put everyone in the mood for Christmas.

### 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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