

Tenant Topics

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A colourful summer display



Grass verges in Naas Lane, Lydney will be a riot of colour this summer, thanks to a pilot project launched by our staff.

Two grass areas at the end of Manor Road are being planted with wildflowers to encourage bees and wildlife, and to brighten up the road for the benefit of residents, pedestrians and other road-users.

A team of staff are creating the flower beds during March, in anticipation of a wonderful display through the late spring and early summer.

Children from nearby Severnbanks Primary School are also getting involved by helping to sow the seeds and designing signs to be displayed in the area, identifying them as special wildflower beds.

The project is the brainchild of our staff 'Green Group' which is behind various initiatives such as crisp packet and pen recycling and switching to plastic-free tea bags.

The group bid for money from the Travis Perkins Community Fund to create the flower beds and hopes that, if the project proves successful, it can be extended to other areas in future.

Rebecca James (Welfare, Benefit and Debt Advisor), Amy James (Neighbourhood Housing Advisor) and Claire Carter (HomePlus Scheme Co-ordinator) prepare the new wildlife area in Naas Lane.

"Wildflowers create a brilliant display and attract all sorts of other wildlife, too," explained Rebecca James, one of our Welfare, Benefit and Debt Advisors who leads the Green Group.

"I'm really pleased the school wants to be involved and, if this project goes well, I would love to see local residents joining in, maybe working with us on even more ambitious projects such as planting fruit trees and creating small community orchards."

Help us to change

Our Resident Scrutiny Group and Tenant Forum have been brought together in a brand new Challenge and Change Group.

As the name implies, the group exists to challenge us on our working practices and suggest changes that will improve our service.

There's a good example of the type of work this group gets involved within the centre pages of this newsletter, where the group has completed a review of our empty homes – or voids – process. Members will also help to assess our performance and review policies, deciding which areas they wish to focus attention on next.

Input from the group is really valuable as it gives an objective view of what we do and questions why we do things in certain ways. Our tenants can offer a very different perspective, and often ask simple, yet fundamental questions

that can completely turn our view of something on its head.

We offer training for group members which might help those who are keen to learn new skills that could be useful on a CV. We will also pay travel expenses to meetings or arrange transport for those who would otherwise find it difficult to get to them.

Meetings are currently held every two months on a Wednesday afternoon in Coleford BUT this could be changed and

members don't always have to attend meetings in person as some of the business can just as easily be carried out via Skype or other technologies. We are also open to tenants getting involved by email or social media.

If you think you might like to help challenge and change what we do – whether you attend our meetings or get involved digitally – please get in touch with Anthea Tawney – **anthea.tawney@2rh.org.uk** or call **0800 316 0897**.



Challenge & Change

Two Rivers Housing

10% OFF WITH THIS ADVERT

Replacing lightbulbs has always been our tenants' responsibility – and that includes kitchen striplights.

We have just negotiated an excellent **10% discount for tenants on all striplight bulbs and starter units** from Lydney-based 'Light Fantastic DIY'.



If you need help fitting the new bulb you can book our Handyman, but he is busy and you may have to wait for him to be free.



Light Fantastic is open Monday to Saturday 9:00 – 5:00 and Sunday 10:00 – 4:00. They can deliver, but there is a charge for this.

LIGHT FANTASTIC – 6A FOREST ROAD, LYDNEY, GL15 5LB

TEL 01594 843654



New homes on their way

We're right on course for a summer opening of seven new homes in the popular town of Stonehouse.

The two-bedroom houses stand on the site of the old Stagholt Pavilion, providing excellent transport links and great opportunities for those wishing to find a home for low-cost rent or Shared Ownership.

The site was originally earmarked for private housing, however, a grant from Homes England and funds from Stroud District Council helped to secure it for affordable homes. They are due to be completed in July.

"There is a real shortage of affordable housing in rural locations and these will give people the opportunity to part-



Representatives of Homes England, Stroud District Council, Standish Parish Council, Harper Group and the Mayor of Stonehouse join Angharad Hodge (front left) and Terri Hibberd (front right) from Two Rivers Housing.

buy or rent a home in the village where they grew up," said Terri Hibberd, our Development Manager.

We have committed to build at least 1,000 new homes by 2028 and development sites currently include Lydney, Newent, Longhope, Staunton, Tutshill, Tewkesbury, Tetbury and Ashchurch.

Councillor Chas Townley from Stroud District Council said: **"Working with Homes England we have been able to support Two Rivers to provide high quality affordable homes on land adjacent to Stonehouse. This is a good example of partnership working to help meet local housing needs."**



Working smarter

Centigen operatives will be able to work smarter when the new supplier contract takes effect.

A new supplier has been appointed to provide our building materials in a way that will modernise how we work.

The new arrangement with Grafton will lead to better management of the items our Centigen operatives carry on their vehicles and a service that will deliver extra supplies directly to them, rather than expecting them to return to a depot to re-stock.

This should save them valuable time and make our overall service more efficient and effective.

Gareth Vincent, Centigen's Operations Manager, said: *"Our previous contract had been in place for 10 years, and this was a great opportunity to see how we could benefit from the way services had changed in that time."*

"We were pleased to find we could take advantage of digital advancements which will be an important step towards improving the quality of our own service."

The new contract takes effect on 1 April 2020.

Let's make a date

If we make an appointment you're unable to meet, please let us know and re-arrange it as soon as you can.

We have a duty to carry out annual safety checks to your home and, if we run over that 12-month period, it could put the safety of your family members and visitors at risk.

We will write to you with a morning or afternoon appointment. If you need to change this, please call our freephone number within five working days, and we will re-arrange it for you. Thank you.

SAVING TIP

If you have an illness that means you use a lot of water (eg incontinence or eczema) you could get a discount on your water bill with Severn Trent Water's WaterSure scheme. Look on their website to see if you are eligible.

Elaine's new happy place

Work to find new homes for our tenants at Johnstone Close is going well, and those moving to new properties are really appreciating the help they have to make their move.

Elaine Pearce swapped her flat in Staunton (Gloucester) for a bungalow in Drybrook and the whole process went really smoothly, from start to finish, thanks in part to the support of Scheme Co-ordinator Marianne Roy.

"As soon as I saw it, I knew it was the home for me," said Elaine. "It was much more spacious than my property at

Johnstone Close, was nicely decorated and has central heating.

"Two Rivers organised removal vans, new carpets, new curtains and mail redirection – and they paid for it all, too. The removal company was brilliant and did all the packing for me. Then Two Rivers sent its Handyman round to put up the curtains in my new living room. Within a couple of weeks I was in my new home."

When Johnstone Close is empty we will begin the demolition. We don't have any plans of what the replacement scheme

"We are doing our best to make the move from Johnstone Close as pain-free as we can" said Rachel Smith, Assistant Director of Housing. "Whether they are moving permanently, or if they plan to return when the new homes are ready, we want our tenants to be settled, comfortable and happy with their choice."

will look like yet, but we will consult with residents and neighbours when we start to draw them up.

The whole project will take several years to complete.

What a GEM!

Two Rivers Housing often takes young people from local schools on work experience placements, and we have recently started working with the Gloucestershire GEM Project.

GEM – Going the Extra Mile – supports people dealing with circumstances that potentially cause barriers to work, helping them to move closer to education, training, volunteering or work.

We recently offered a place in our Planned Maintenance team, and this is how the two-week experience was described:

"I was scared of being in a new environment with new people, and of the responsibility of work, but everyone there was very nice to me and, thanks to this work experience, I now know that I am able to cope with working in this kind of office environment and can be more confident in applying for this kind of work, and other kinds, in the future."

Luke Beard, Assistant Director at Two Rivers said *"We were delighted to be able to help. This is a really fantastic initiative and it's clear that the two weeks spent with us made a huge difference."*





New look for repairs team

Our repairs team started the new year with a brand new look, wearing completely different uniforms to mark their transfer to our Centigen FM business.

You will still see the same familiar faces, but they are now wearing grey, black and green Centigen-branded clothing rather than the Two Rivers blue, blending in with their colleagues in grounds maintenance and cleaning.

All Centigen staff carry Centigen ID badges, but some will continue to drive the Two Rivers Housing vans until we are able to change them, and that could take a few months.

If you have any doubts about the person calling at your door, please do ring us before letting them in.

We have recently heard of people going to houses in the Forest of Dean pretending to represent Two Rivers Housing or Forest of Dean District Council and asking to check boilers or utilities. They don't have any formal ID but some have pieces of paper with a logo on it.

All our operatives – and those working on our behalf – have pre-booked appointments and carry photo ID badges. They will not be offended if you ask them to wait outside while you check they are authentic.

If you ring our office – **0800 316 0897** – and describe them to us, we should be able to tell you whether or not they are genuine and safe to let in.

All of our team carry ID

If you are unsure call the office.



Don't like Mondays? You will do now!

The weekend's over and maybe your friends and family are at work, so what does Monday feel like?

If you're looking for a positive start to the week ahead, there's a group that meets in Newent every Monday afternoon, and it's ready to welcome you.

The Over 60s club is basically an excuse to meet up and have a good chat. There's a weekly bingo session,

a small bring-and-buy stall and, of course, there are hot drinks, biscuits and the occasional slice of cake.

Not only that, but the group holds events to celebrate occasions such as Easter and Christmas, and there are trips out during the summer months.

You don't even have to live in the town or be a Two Rivers tenant, so if you're in Mitcheldean and you think your friend in Newent might like it, then why not

come along together? The more the merrier!

The group meets every Monday afternoon between 2 and 4pm in the communal lounge at St Bartholomew's in Newent, and there's an annual subscription of just £5.

If you would like to know more, please contact Frances Berry on **01531 822133** or call in to St Bart's on a Monday afternoon.

Empty properties' standard review



Challenge
& Change
Two Rivers Housing



The Two Rivers Housing tenant Challenge and Change Group has just finished an in-depth review of what happens when a tenant says they wish to leave our property.

Everything about the process has come under the microscope, from the inspections we carry out prior to the tenant leaving, to when they actually leave and the work we do to get the property ready for the next tenant following our 'What to expect in your new home' lettable standard.

Now the review is complete and the group's recommendations have been pulled together into a report that will be considered by the Two Rivers Housing Group Board.

Here's the group's report...

What the group did



Over the last six months, we – a group of 10 tenant members of the Challenge and Change Group – have been working with the Two Rivers Housing Community Engagement team and Lettings Team Leader to look at the void standard and the process from the point the property becomes empty to when it is ready for letting.

We visited seven homes just after the tenants left, and re-visited when the keys were ready to be handed over to the new tenants. We also looked at one newly-built home to compare the condition.



before



after

- We met the Centigen repairs team staff who prepare empty properties for the next tenants, and heard their experiences.
- We met the Lettings Team Leader to review the process and the current home quality standards and compare them with other housing associations.
- We reviewed the information given to tenants explaining what is expected of them when they leave their property, and what new tenants can expect of their new home.
- We learned how and when out-going tenants are recharged for repairs, rubbish removal and cleaning.
- In-going tenants were interviewed to find out what they thought of their new home.



Three members of the Challenge and Change Group: Bob Turner, Steve Hurley and Colin Lumsden.

some of the group!

What did we learn?



- We found it really interesting to see the condition some people leave their homes in – some are absolutely spotless and some are left in a very poor state.
- We learned about the financial incentives for tenants leaving their property in good condition, and the decorating vouchers for in-going tenants.
- We discussed how often Two Rivers reviews the condition of all its properties, and if this should be carried out more regularly.
- We had lively discussions about whether or not things like carpets and wallpaper should be left for the next tenant or if they should be removed, and what should happen to window and meter box keys. We also talked about responsibility for local authority bins.
- We reviewed the information available for tenants and whether this could be improved.
- We considered the recharging policy and the scale of costs some tenants may face, including for cleaning.

What happens next?

All the recommendations are being considered by the Group Board. We will then monitor the approved recommendations and make sure they are implemented.

We will now consider what our next Challenge and Change project will be.



Main recommendations



- 1 All homes should be visited more regularly to monitor their condition.
- 2 Information in the 'Empty homes reward scheme' leaflet should be improved.
- 3 The financial reward for tenants leaving their property in good condition (as judged by TRH inspectors) should be increased to £75, and be payable as a cheque or shopping vouchers.
- 4 Out-going tenants should be able to gift carpets in good condition to the next tenant. If the new tenant does not wish to keep the carpets, they must arrange/ pay for their disposal. This also applies to blinds.
- 5 Make sure meter box keys are left in properties.
- 6 The value of decorating vouchers provided to new tenants if their home does not meet the TRH standards of decoration, is considered adequate. However, consideration should be given to using the voucher to buy carpets or curtains.
- 7 Information in the 'What to expect in your new home' leaflet should be improved.
- 8 The Two Rivers Planned Maintenance and Voids teams should review whether upgrades are needed when a property becomes empty.
- 9 Keys for window locks are not currently provided but this should be considered further.
- 10 The group spotted an issue with people not answering their phones when being called for interview. As a result they recommend that Two Rivers review the practice of withholding its number when making telephone calls.

Would you like to be involved?



This was a really interesting project to be involved with. We were able to talk to staff, we saw what goes on behind the scenes and were able to call on our personal experience as tenants to ask questions and make suggestions. Group members didn't always agree, but we enjoyed a healthy debate.

If you would be interested in being involved in similar reviews of Two Rivers Housing services, we would welcome your contribution.

You can find out more by contacting Anthea Tawney in Community Engagement. Email anthea.tawney@2rh.org.uk or call 0800 316 0897.

Garden makeover



Here's how the garden area looked before the make-over.



Clare Tipler (centre) joins the Centigen team to celebrate the first phase of the transformation. Now it's ready for benches and planters to be installed.

An unruly border of shrubs at the back of one of our Gloucester city centre properties has been transformed into a tidy outdoor space for tenants to be able to enjoy over the spring and summer.

Where once there was just a mass of shrubs such as privet and buddleia, there is now a lovely gravelled area waiting for benches and planters to be installed, creating a lovely sunny spot where residents can relax and the children can play.

Kathryn Hamilton, our Neighbourhood Housing Advisor said: ***"I absolutely love what they've done with this space. It looks great and I'm sure our tenants will enjoy having a place to be outside and enjoy the good weather."***

The work was carried out at the Wellington Street flats by our Centigen team and funded with an £800 grant from the Travis Perkins Community Fund. Travis Perkins puts money into the fund in recognition of our work with them, and the cash can then be spent on community improvement projects.

Be alert

If you smell gas in your home and think there could be a leak:

- turn off your supply if you can (the mains tap should be next to your gas meter).
- open windows and doors.
- extinguish any naked flames.
- call the national emergency number 0800 111 999.

Push the button

It only takes one simple accident to start a fire and it can start in any room of your home.

A tea towel left too close to the cooker, a card that falls onto a candle, a cigarette dropped onto the sofa or clothes left drying in front of a fire – all things that could happen in any home, at any time.

Fire can spread within seconds and smoke alarms literally are life-savers by giving early warning of the start of a fire. They are fitted to every Two Rivers home and we service them every year, but we also support fire service advice to all residents to carry out their own regular checks by pressing the test button every week or every month.

The fire service also offers free home safety checks to anyone who would like to find out more about how to prevent fire in their home. Our own 'Health and Safety Handbook' includes a section about fire and you will find this in the 'Library' on our website.

We also strongly recommend you take out contents insurance to cover your personal belongings in the event of fire, flood or theft. More information on our website under 'Your home/Money matters/Contents insurance'.



Kiera Taylor takes advantage of the range of glitter to make a headstart with preparing Christmas decorations.



Spring fun

Our first Holiday Club of 2020 was packed with happy, smiling children, and that's just the way we like it!

Our friends at The Wiggly Worm laid on another fantastic feast for everyone and, a packed two-hour programme of fun activities. It was a great way to pass the time during the school holidays.

Stacey Amos, who has attended a number of our Holiday Club events with her children said: *"It's really great to have somewhere to bring the kids that's free – especially in February."*

"With three kids it can be expensive in the holidays, so we try to come to these as often as we can."

We're already planning our Easter event, so keep any eye on our website and social media for the details.



Violet Turner and Alisha Shurmer enjoy a balancing game.

Save, save, save

We may be emerging from one of the most expensive times of year, but we should still be looking for ways to save money – particularly when lots of things are just plain common sense and they can help save the planet, too.

For example:

- A running tap wastes more than six litres of water every minute, so turn it off when brushing your teeth, shaving or washing your face.
- Turn the light off when you leave a room, even if it's only for a few

seconds, as it will save more energy than it takes to start it up again.

- Replace lightbulbs with LEDs; they're so efficient they could save approx. £35 per year.



- Don't leave appliances on standby or laptops, tablets and phones on charge for longer than necessary.

The other thing we strongly recommend is to check you're getting the best deal with your gas, electricity, broadband and insurance. This is so easy if you use the online comparison websites, such as Go Compare, Uswitch, MoneySuperMarket and Compare the Market – and the Citizens Advice website has a comparison tool, as well.

Not every company is represented on these sites but it's a great starting point. If you've never done it before, you could save hundreds of pounds – which you could put aside to help with your spending next winter and Christmas.

The future's bright



Sacha waits for her turn to join the judging team.

Our future is safe in the hands of our next generation of young entrepreneurs who are brimming with ideas to make life better.

This was evident when our Surveyor, Sarah Davis, and Sacha Hutcheson from our partner contractor United Living, took part in the Young Entrepreneurs inter-schools competition at Severn Vale School in Gloucester.

Sarah and Sacha were each given a team of up to six students to mentor. Their role was to encourage them to work as a team to agree an innovative idea, come up with funding and marketing strategies, and then pitch their idea to a panel of judges.

This was a new twist for our Helping Hands volunteering activity, which is often dominated by an array of practical outdoor tasks such as painting and gardening. It also proved an excellent way for the two women to share their knowledge and skills with an enthusiastic group of young people.



"It was a fascinating day and so interesting to watch the children," said Sacha. "It started slowly when they were trying to think of ideas, but I asked them questions and that seemed to help. Also, it was interesting to see their different strengths and weaknesses as the day went on."

Springing into action...

Our Centigen grounds maintenance team is preparing for the start of the new season, getting ready to keep our open spaces tidy over the spring and summer.

There are three different levels of service provided, according to the type of home in each area:

1. Most tenants benefit from a 'standard' cut where the cuttings are collected at the beginning of the season, they're left in place mid to late-summer, and collected after the final cut of the year.
2. HomePlus residents pay extra for an 'enhanced cut' and more attention to detail.

3. Areas where our homes are outnumbered by home-owners (who don't contribute towards the cost of the service) receive a 'reduced' 'cut-and-drop' four times a year.

Please note that some areas may not be cut if there are vehicles parked or property left on/next to them when the team visits. This is to avoid the risk of damage.

The grounds maintenance schedule and estate maps can be found on our website. Go to the 'Your home' section and choose the page called 'Grass cutting'. If you have any questions about the service you're receiving, please contact your Neighbourhood Housing Advisor.



New year – new start

The new year signalled a fresh and exciting start for one of our tenants, whose move to her new home also signalled the achievement of a milestone for Two Rivers.

Samantha Kennedy's flat was the last of 56 properties we took from Gloucester-based Newland Homes, across three different sites throughout the county.

The homes at Toddington, Willersey and Hempsted are a mix of affordable rent, social rent and Shared Ownership, offering great



choice for people according to their circumstances, and all were keenly snapped up by tenants.

Samantha swapped a Cirencester bedsit for her brand new one-bedroom flat in

the Cotswold village of Willersey and couldn't be happier with her choice.

"I absolutely love it," she said. "It's perfect for me and I'm so excited to have a garden, too."



Easter BBQ?

Spring is definitely on its way and, with an April Easter break around the corner, many will be praying for an early start to the barbecue season.

With that in mind, here's a timely reminder of how to make sure your al fresco cooking experience is a safe one.

- Give your barbecue a quick condition-check, looking out for rust, loose or damaged parts.
- Put it on a level, fire-proof surface. You don't want your sausages rolling away, or your garden table catching fire!

- Never light a barbecue indoors or on a balcony.
- Position your barbecue away from things that could catch fire, eg sheds, fences, trees, garden furniture.
- Never use an accelerant, such as petrol or alcohol, as it could explode.
- When cooking is over, make sure the barbecue is fully extinguished before you leave it, and the coals have cooled before disposing of them.

Enjoy your meal!

Think before you flush

We are regularly called out to tackle blocked drains and, more often than not, they're caused by inappropriate items being flushed down the toilet.

Tempting as it is to see the loo as an easy way to put things out of sight and mind, the consequences could come back to haunt you.

One of the biggest culprits is wet-wipes which do not break down easily. They stay intact for years, contribute to 90% of sewer blockages and can be devastating for wildlife.

Human waste and toilet paper are the only things that should be flushed down the toilet. Everything else has its own, proper place and, if you follow that rule, you will be less likely to suffer the inconvenience of a blocked drain or waste pipe.

There's a 'Toilet waste – disposal advice' leaflet on our website with more information.

SAVING TIP

Entertain the kids cheaply at Easter by looking out for cheap cinema tickets, kids eat 'free' offers, craft fairs and festivals that are free to enter.





Spring tea break

r	o	b	w	s	s	g	y	p	i	l	u	t
e	a	d	u	c	k	l	i	n	g	b	m	o
t	m	i	r	t	w	s	r	e	w	o	l	f
s	o	e	u	t	t	n	b	a	k	c	n	p
a	s	u	r	f	m	e	s	c	i	e	r	c
e	s	k	p	u	o	d	r	b	d	n	t	h
f	o	c	t	y	t	r	a	f	h	g	n	i
t	l	a	m	b	s	a	g	p	l	k	s	c
l	b	s	n	d	l	g	n	f	l	y	u	k

Which **spring** word is missing from the grid?

blossom
butterfly
chick

daffodil
duckling
easter

flowers
garden
lambs

nature
rain
tulip

Name: _____

Address: _____

Tel number/email: _____

'Angel' was the missing word in our Christmas crossword and the prize this time has been awarded to Theresa Baker.

Hopefully the £15 gift voucher will arrive at a good time, either to recover following the Christmas expenditure or maybe she will use it as a personal treat.

We've returned to the popular wordsearch this time, taking Easter as our theme. All you need to do is find the word that doesn't appear in the list underneath and tell us what that is.

You can enter either by emailing us – **communications@2rh.org.uk** – with the missing word, including your postal address details, or you can complete and return the form to us.

Communications team
Two Rivers Housing
Cleeve Mill Lane
Newent
Gloucestershire
GL18 1DS

The first correct entry selected at random after **30 April** wins the £15 gift voucher.

Good luck!

Happy pigs!

It may not look very inviting to us, but this porker is clearly as happy as a pig in clover in the new enclosure our tenants helped to provide for him and his friends.

A group of residents from Ryelands Road in Bream donated £350 raised at coffee mornings to help The Orchard Trust in Lydbrook to improve the pens for its own four-legged tenants.

And if this handsome creature is representative of his fellow pigs, they will be very content with their refurbished surroundings, so well done to everyone in Bream who helped to make it happen.

If he could speak, I'm sure this happy pig would want to say thank you to our tenants in Bream!

Contact us:

Please tell us if you would like this in large print or on audio CD.

Freephone
0800 316 0897

Email
customerservices@2rh.org.uk

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