

Issue No. 47
Autumn 2011

Interlink

Residents' Newsletter

 Suffolk
Housing
Society

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**Blooming
marvellous!**

NEWS

Helping hand for village residents

Suffolk's villages have been urged to bid for their share of £15,000 to fund important projects designed to boost village life.

The initiative funded by the Society and called "Village Gold", is open to people living in a rural area and who are working on schemes to improve quality of life or facilities in their village. Applications for all sorts of things are being encouraged, including schemes to install new play facilities, improve village halls or set up crime prevention groups.

Ian Winslet, Chief Executive said: "We recognise the importance of supporting our rural communities and take our role as a champion of village life extremely seriously."

The first project to benefit from the Village Gold funding is a £3,300 scheme to upgrade the basketball area at the rear of Hopton Village Hall.

Tudor Venn, from Hopton Parish Council, said: "As is the case in many villages, this council is conscious of the lack of amenities for teenagers in our community. We are therefore very grateful for the support of Suffolk Housing in assisting the Village Hall Management Committee to provide the tarmac base for a basketball and netball area, as requested by one of our younger villagers."

Anyone who is interested in applying for Village Gold funding should email villages@suffolkhousing.org for more information.



VILLAGE GOLD
Suffolk Housing Society
Funded Project

New Tenancy

In a couple of months' we, along with most other Housing Associations, will be introducing a new type of tenancy for all our new homes and some of our existing homes when they are re-let. If you are not moving home, or you are a tenant in either our sheltered or supported housing the changes will not affect you.

The new tenancies have been introduced to allow more flexibility when letting homes. We want to make sure that those living in our homes are doing so because they cannot afford to buy or rent on the open market. Any additional rent that we get through the changes will help us fund new homes.

The new tenancies will be offered on a fixed term for a period of five years initially. As now, this may follow a Starter Tenancy of a year. The rents charged on these new tenancies will be about 20 – 30% higher than the rents that are charged at the moment on our existing tenancies.

Towards the end of the five year period, we will be talking to tenants who have these new tenancies to check their financial circumstances and judge if they can afford to move either into home ownership or the private sector. If so, it is unlikely that the tenancy will be renewed.

We must stress again that this will only affect existing tenants if they choose or need to move home.

If you have any concerns about whether or not you may be affected by this change then please do contact us and we will do our best to answer your queries.

JOIN IN

"A two way process involving sharing of information and ideas, where tenants are able to influence decisions and take part in what is happening." – Definition of Resident Involvement

Welcome to the Autumn edition of the 'Join In' page for Resident Involvement at Suffolk Housing Society.

It's been a busy summer and it was a pleasure to meet so many people at the recent Haverhill Big Day Out (see right).

We now have a Residents' Menu of Involvement (pictured right) which explains all about resident involvement and how it impacts on the work Suffolk Housing Society does. The booklet lists the many different ways in which you can take part in involvement, from filling out a survey to being a Resident Inspector or member of Tenant's Voice. Please contact me via the details below if you would like to receive a copy.

Over the page is some news on our new Resident Inspectors and some details of the improvements residents have helped to make from the Mystery Shopping project earlier this year.

If you would like to be involved in Mystery Shopping, or any other form of resident involvement why not get in touch? Perhaps you think we could improve and want your point of view represented, or maybe you are perfectly happy with the service you receive but would like to make a positive contribution, or would just like an insight into how we work. Either way we would be pleased to hear from you.

Jonathan Routledge

Tenant Liaison Officer

CONTACT ME

T: 01284 715391 **E:** jonathan@suffolkhousing.org

Write to: Tenant Liaison Officer, Suffolk Housing Society, Old Mission House, St Botolph's Lane, Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk IP33 2AX



Big success at the Haverhill Big Day Out

In August we attended the Haverhill Big Day out where we gave housing information and advice to the public. In total we had over 130 people visit our stall. We also ran a free competition for a family day out at Colchester Zoo, congratulations to Justine Hart (Below) who successfully selected Barrow as the birthplace of our cuddly tiger!



Mystery Shopping

A number of residents volunteered to help us carry out a mystery shop on Suffolk Housing Society. For those of you who are unsure, mystery shopping is a term used to describe people posing as customers to assess how a company performs. The results of the mystery shop showed that we are doing quite well, but some areas were identified that we could improve. These include:

- Training to help staff when dealing with reports of anti-social behaviour and to generally improve the quality of advice given to all callers
- Reducing the time taken to respond to emails
- Improve our telephone response rate
- Providing clearer name badges to be worn by staff

If you would like to see the full report please contact us for a free copy. If you would be interested in being part of a future mystery shop contact Jonathan for more information on 01284 715391 or email jonathan@suffolkhousing.org



Resident Service Inspectors

Since the last edition of Interlink we have had plenty of interest in our new Resident Inspector role. Training for our inspectors will be starting in October and it's not too late if you would like be part of our growing team. The Resident Service Inspectors are volunteer residents who investigate a specific service area and report back to us on their findings. We then make improvements based on their recommendations. Please get in touch if you would like to know more about the role and how you could help us and other residents maintain a good level of service from your housing provider.



And the winner is...

In our Spring edition we asked you for a caption to go with the photo of Rob Longfoot fire walking. The winning entry was sent in by Mrs Burrows from Trafalgar House with:

"When they told me I needed to hot foot it sometimes they never mentioned over hot coals!"

We can also announce the winners of our gardening competition. We had 28 entrants this year providing the judges with a riot of colour. The difficult decisions were made by independent judge Roderick Sprake. Mrs Winch, from Sudbury, picked up the prize for Pots and Planters category and Mr and Mrs Guthrie of Haverhill won the garden category (see front cover). Winners received garden centre vouchers.

Could you be our next winner?

To be in with the chance of winning £25 of vouchers why not submit a funny photo from your summer. Did you get caught by a wave at Felixstowe, or perhaps you got a good soaking at one of the festivals or carnivals that took place over the summer. Send your entry by email to hazel@suffolkhousing.org or post to Old Mission House, St Botolph's Lane, Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk IP33 2AX. Don't forget to include your name, address, day time contact number and (if under 18) your age. Good Luck!



Susan's

UPDATE

It's time again to update you on the things that have been happening with Tenants Voice (TV).

Firstly at the last TV meeting we elected a new representative to sit on the Board with me, the Chair, and the Vice Chair, Paula Bone. Joan Matthewman has stood down as her term of office had ended. There were two candidates, and the members voted for Andy Balfour. So I would like to congratulate him on his election to this position, and to thank Joan for the sterling work she has done on our behalf since being on the Board. She will still be a TV member and so can still be contacted as such.

I'd like to thank all those who have sent in suggestion and comment sheets to TV members. It has been useful to hear your comments, but just a reminder that we are all volunteers and when contacting us, people should be respectful and polite. We will be happy to pass your comments on, and hopefully help you to resolve any issues.

Elsewhere in this edition you will find Alan Dagger's interesting report from his first maintenance liaison meeting. It seems to me he has the enthusiasm and knowledge to represent our interests, and to carry forward any suggestions or concerns we may have on this important subject.

We are still working on the Annual Report, with each member taking a specific area to comment on. I can't wait for the finished article, as it is the first report produced by tenants for tenants. Finally I'd like to encourage all of you to take an active interest in all things to do with your tenancy – as I believe this is a great opportunity to influence the Society, and work with them to give us all a positive experience living in a Suffolk Housing home.

Susan Feary, Chairman

Is there an issue you would like Tenants Voice to discuss?

Contact Susan on 01638 615413 or email: suekat@googlemail.com



Alan Dagger is now a resident representative at the Society's contractor liaison meetings. These meetings take place quarterly with each of the Society's main contractors. The purpose of these meetings is to assess the contractor's performance and raise any issues our residents may have experienced. See below for what Alan thought of his first contractor Liaison Meeting.

"As a Tenants Voice member, I recently attended a contractor liaison meeting led by the Society's Technical Services Manager, Justin O'Connor, and included representatives from Trevor Benton Group who deal with the majority of the day to day repairs. This was the first occasion I had been involved with this type of meeting, for want of a better description my presence was more as an observer. However, I felt quite at ease in the friendly but business like atmosphere, the meeting provided an opportunity to appreciate, generally speaking, how the maintenance system works.

One item of discussion was around the four repair categories -Emergency, Urgent, Non Urgent and Routine - where it was revealed that between January and June 2011 the average response time for each category was a 99.25% success rate. Whilst most residents will no doubt gauge the satisfaction rate around the performance of an individual tradesman, it became apparent that the input and time spent by the customer service team was an important factor in ensuring that repair response times met the standards as set down in the tenants handbook.

A surprising aspect was that on occasions, the tradesmen experienced some difficulty in arranging access to a property to carry out a repair. Whilst I fully appreciate the busy lives many of us lead if, for example, we needed to employ a contractor to repair a washing machine and we were aware of the cost implication, we would ensure that access was available on the given date. It would therefore, be more than useful, to all concerned that when reporting a repair that times and dates of availability within the normal working hours are provided. I feel this is a common sense approach that should avoid wasted time and effort for all parties. The two hours or so spent at the meeting I found generally informative."



Feedback from Back to Basics Report

When we published our Back to Basics report last year we promised we would do a number of things. The 2011 report is due out shortly so we wanted to tell you what we've done around anti-social behaviour and complaints.

Taking a firm stand

A group of tenants and staff reviewed our Anti-Social Behaviour Policy and as a result we will be working on a series of leaflets to give more information and guidance on what you and we can do to combat incidents of anti-social behaviour (ASB).

We have had a number of more serious cases of ASB recently where we have taken legal action and successfully obtained injunctions to prohibit certain types of behaviour or in the more extreme cases possession orders to evict the perpetrators from their property.

Court action is always seen as a last resort and is a very costly and time consuming process. In order to achieve successful results we need substantial cooperation from complainants which can include keeping diary sheets and providing witness statements. This type of evidence is vital in presenting cases to court in order to secure the necessary order.

Your Neighbourhood

In our last resident satisfaction survey (2009) 21% of our residents were concerned about the level of rubbish and litter in their neighbourhood. It's fair to say that the majority of our schemes are well maintained and looked after but some do look tired. This is not helped when the grounds maintenance contractors are not able to mow the grass where dogs have been exercised and owners haven't cleaned up after them.

I WANT TO COMPLAIN

In April this year a number of tenants met to review the complaints process and agreed a number of changes to the system which includes a new form for you to use to make a complaint, make a suggestion or pass on a compliment.

If you haven't received a copy of this form with this edition of Interlink you can download one from www.suffolkhousing.org or contact customer services on 01284 767224 (customerservices@suffolkhousing.org) who can pop one in the post.

This might be an opportune moment to remind you that if you have got a concern about our services, staff or your neighbourhood please don't sit in silence and stew about it or think someone else will report the problem, especially if it is something that you feel the Society should deal with. We can't guarantee that we can make everything better, but in a nutshell if we don't know about the problem we won't be able to help resolve the problem.

We all need to play our part in maintaining the neighbourhoods we live in to ensure they remain a safe and welcoming environment. So what can you do...

- If you are a pet owner please make sure you clean up after your pet
- If you have bulky items to dispose of ring the local authority to arrange a special collection please don't just dump items in the bin stores in the hope they will disappear!
- Communal gardens are there for everyone's enjoyment, if you use them please make sure you tidy up after yourself
- When leaving food out for birds or squirrels make sure it is a small amount, any left overs may encourage mice and rats into the area
- If you notice damage to drying areas, bin stores or fencing or you would like to suggest an improvement to your scheme such as additional planting / improvements to lighting / changes to the bin stores let your housing officer know when they are on site or ring customer services on 01284 767224 so we can make the necessary arrangements

And what will we do....

- We will visit our schemes approximately every six weeks to inspect and identify any repairs that need carrying out and ensure that where appropriate a repair order is raised
- We will carry out a grounds maintenance walk about with the contractor at least once a year
- We will put forward your suggestions for improvements and where budgets allow we will arrange for that work to be carried out
- We will liaise with the Safer Neighbourhood teams and carry out joint site visits where required

My experience of the London Riots



The riots in England shocked the nation; hopefully it wasn't something most of our residents had to experience. Tenants Voice member, Lisa Cudd, was unfortunately caught up in the middle of the violence whilst visiting family and friends. The following is about her experience.

I was visiting my mum in Wood Green, North London and could not believe what I was going to experience. Nothing out of the ordinary in the day time, busy as usual but from the hours of 6pm, the mood changed. All of a sudden you saw loads of police surrounding the streets and we were being told not to leave our property. It was scary hearing the sirens, helicopters and trying not to look outside the house.

Watching the news we saw shops being smashed up, vandalism, fires and looting all over the place. I couldn't believe what was happening virtually on my own doorstep. The police looked powerless to do anything and the rioters were taking over the streets.

A harsh realisation hit me, my friends living in the area, were they OK? And what if the riot spread to Wood Green? What would happen to us? I grabbed my phone

and contacted my friends, they were all fine but it was a worrying time.

About 11pm still glued to the TV, things seem to have reached a stalemate. Was it over? Was it dying down? We hoped it was, buildings that have been there for years were being destroyed. It was like a scene from the blitz. What possesses people to do this?

Waking up on Sunday and seeing the devastation, people in broad daylight brazenly looking at what they have just stolen.

Then as quickly as it had all started it seemed to stop. Midday approached and the police seemed to have gained a semblance of control. I couldn't believe how it had spread to so many different parts of London in such a small space of time, but I have to say what was good was seeing the community helping each other and cleaning up afterwards. Driving out of London a few days later I couldn't believe it had happened, I was just glad that we were fine, our friends and family were all OK.

By Lisa Cudd, Tenants Voice.

Have you got something you would like to write about which could be included in Interlink? Perhaps you would like to tell us about something you have experienced? Maybe you fancy your hand at planning the content of the newsletter and would the opportunity to be a guest editor, we have four editions a year so there is plenty of scope for articles and volunteers.

Meanwhile back in the office...

Apart from letting you know we've got a new chief executive it's been a while since we updated you about staff...

We say hello to:

- **Carolyn Laws** who joins as Scheme Co-ordinator at Thurston
- **Karen Moore**, who joined us last August on a temporary contract as Office Manager, has now been appointed Corporate Services Manager. Karen oversees the Business Support and Customer Service Teams
- **Lauren Mitson** responded to our advert for an apprentice and was successfully appointed as Housing Trainee in August.

And goodbye...

Business Support has taken the brunt of staff change this year; Emma Welsh had a beautiful daughter just after Christmas and has decided that her place is at home with her family. Maureen Staff has also made the decision to retire, which will enable her to spend more time with her family and grandchildren.



Other changes:

Following the introduction of a new Work Life Balance policy a number of staff have taken the opportunity to amend their working hours. In most cases you can contact your Housing Officer from 8.30am, but Rob Longfoot and Heidi Adams are available from 8am for a couple of days every other week. Richard Baker, Technical Services Officer and Justin O'Connor, Technical Services Manager are also generally out and about from 8am. The main switchboard doesn't open till 9am so if you want to speak to any of these staff before then you will need to ring their direct dial number.

Heidi Adams	Housing Officer	01284 773437
Kirstie Banham	Housing Officer	01284 773447
Richard Harger	Housing Officer	01284 773445
Rob Longfoot	Housing Officer	01284 773439
Richard Baker	Technical Services Officer	01284 773442
Justin O'Connor	Technical Services Manager	01284 773443

DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

28 October:

Resident Inspector Training starts

5th November!

Test your smoke detector

17 November:

Tenants Voice meeting