

Issue No. 46
Summer 2011

Interlink

Residents' Newsletter



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Lots to talk about

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NEWS



Scam alert!

We've been alerted to a Council Tax scam that is operating. Trading Standards have received a number of concerned calls from people saying they had been contacted about a Council Tax rebate or reduction. Some callers pretend an overpayment of Council Tax has been made and the overpaid amount can be refunded if the victim provides their bank details.

Other scammers say they are from the Valuation Office Agency, or council officials, who tell them they are eligible for thousands of pounds in a Council Tax rebate. In most cases, victims are asked to give their credit card or bank account details so the money can be refunded. There have been cases where the caller has asked for a one-off administration fee so the refund can be processed. If someone calls you offering a deal like this, call the police to report them. You should also let your local council know.

While councils do offer refunds on genuine Council Tax payments, these refunds are given free of charge. You should never be asked to pay a fee to receive a refund. They do not ask for your bank account details.

If you think you might be eligible for a refund, contact your local council directly.

If you have given your bank details to a caller like this, contact your bank immediately.

SAVE OUR VILLAGES!

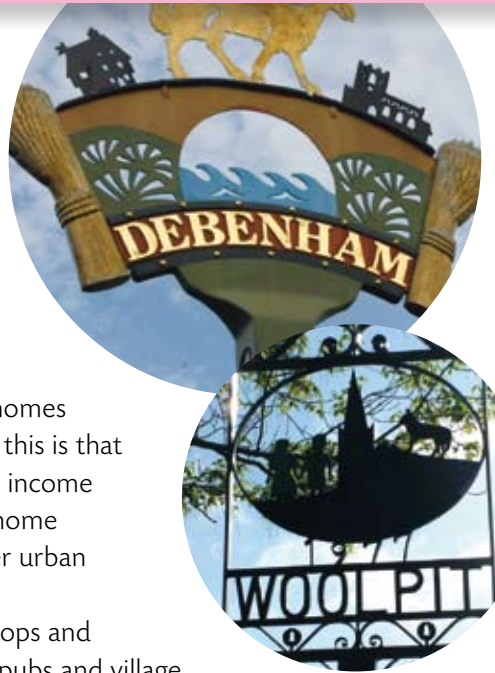
A house in the countryside now costs on average over £40,000 more than a house in a town even though the wages of people working in the countryside are lower.

Despite the desperate need for new homes in many villages the many obstacles that we have to overcome often mean that the number of new homes required are never built. The result of this is that thousands of young people and lower income families are being priced out of their home villages and forced to move to cheaper urban areas.

The knock-on effect is that local shops and services such as schools, post offices, pubs and village halls can struggle to survive as their regular local users disappear.

Suffolk Housing Society is supporting the National Housing Federation's campaign to "Save Our Villages" a reminder to MP's, Councillors and all those involved in supporting village life to have an up to date understanding of the need for affordable housing in rural areas. In July Suffolk Housing Society will host an event in Hopton in support of the campaign. David Orr, the Chief Executive of the National Housing Federation, will be supporting our event and launching "Village Gold" a new community project fund that helps to pay for small projects to assist villages to improve their facilities.

If you would like to find out more about the "Village Gold" pot or more about the "Save Our Villages" campaign e-mail villages@suffolkhousing.org



Morning coffee

Congratulations to our residents at Fornham House who managed to raise £120 for Marie Curie Cancer Care as part of their coffee morning! Have you done something for charity? Let us know and we will feature you here in Interlink

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

A warm welcome to our Join In page for resident involvement.

In this edition of Interlink I have included details of how you can become a Resident Service Inspector. This is a brand new role we are piloting and could put you at the heart of influencing how we manage your homes.

Also included are some frequently asked questions about Resident Involvement. There are all sorts of barriers as to why people might not be keen on taking part or getting involved, so hopefully our answers can dispel any doubts you may have about joining in.

A brand new booklet has recently been produced to explain the different ways you can have an influence in what we do. A preview of the finished version will be shown here in the next edition of Interlink.

There are plenty of ways you can be involved with how we manage properties, why not give me a call to find the best way for you to have an influence.

Jonathan Routledge
Tenant Liaison Officer

"Getting involved won't make any difference"

Unless you get involved you may never be able to influence what we do. If you don't take part how do you know for certain that things won't change. You can always come along to an event to see what happens and then decide whether you think it would be worth continuing.

"I'm happy with the service I receive. I'd consider going to a meeting about something that affected me or my home, but I won't waste time getting involved with things that don't concern me"

Even when you are happy with the service you receive there is always room for improvement. By getting involved you can learn about new services and get the opportunity to influence how they are developed.

It is good to know when we are doing something right, so please tell us when you are particularly happy with us so we know where we are performing well and not so well.

"I haven't done anything like Resident Involvement before, I'm not sure what to expect"

We won't ever throw you in at the deep end. If you are unsure about anything you can always try one type of involvement and then try something else. Our Tenant Liaison Officer is available to talk to and answer any questions you might have about involvement.

For all the latest information and news from your housing Society visit our Facebook page and click on 'Like' at www.facebook.com/suffolkhousingsociety



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

We need your help!

We want to improve our services and we need your help. Resident Service Inspections are one of the ways you can get involved in the review of service delivery. We are recruiting a team of resident service inspectors to look at services to find out what works well and what could be done better.

What is a Resident Service Inspector?

The purpose of the role is to inspect and get feedback from other residents on the services provided by Suffolk Housing Society and to feed back to staff and residents on what needs to be improved and check that these improvements happen.

The aim of Resident Service Inspectors is:

- To assess the services being provided by Suffolk Housing Society
- To suggest how services might be improved
- To contribute with staff to a positive relationship between Suffolk Housing Society and its residents.

The kinds of things that you can do are:

- Estate walkabouts
- Inspecting empty homes that need to be relet
- Inspecting the reporting and carrying out of repairs
- Getting feedback from other residents in person or on the phone
- Helping staff who run the services understand what will make a difference to how satisfied tenants are.

Who can get involved?

- Tenants and leaseholders of Suffolk Housing Society
- Customers who care about helping Suffolk Housing Society to improve and deliver excellent services to tenants
- People of all ages and cultures.

How much time is required?

The first inspection is a pilot, however future inspections may be carried out quarterly. You will be required to attend training in order to be able to carry out the role.

How this might be of benefit to you...

You will receive training and the training itself will contribute to building your confidence and strengthening your employment profile. We will also cover your travel expenses, together with any registered childminder costs.

Interested and want to find out more?

Call 'Jonathan' on 01284 767224 or email jonathan@suffolkhousing.org

What its like to be a Resident Service Inspector by Michelle Symonds

After joining an RSI pilot scheme 3 years ago, I am amazed how much I have learnt and how much I am enjoying it. Once the training was completed, we were all eager to start our inspections.

We all bonded through this process, working very close together, bouncing ideas and recommendations off each other. The greatest satisfaction is when a tenant is pleased with the work we have done on their behalf. The landlords are also pleased with the progress.

Interview with a Tenant Friend

This month we interviewed Leonila Raggatt who has recently joined our network of Tenant Friends.

Q1. What first attracted you to the role of Tenant Friend?

It started with the thought that a Tenant Friend can help equality irrespective of age, gender, religion, race, disability. This happened when I attended the Single Equality Scheme meeting.

Q2. What is it you particularly enjoy about being a Tenant Friend?

I recently enjoyed attending a new training pilot for new residents. It was very refreshing and I got to meet people who are equally enthusiastic in helping others. Listening to the ideas being put forward and discussed and making sure they are beneficial and fair is a really good experience.

Q3. How do you think other residents benefit from the role?

The role can help other residents be good neighbours. If anyone has any difficulties or issues, the Tenant Friend can be there to help and make sure

Suffolk Housing are aware so that something can be done about it.

Q4. How much time do you put into it?

Not a lot. I haven't welcomed any new tenants yet as not many people move from where I live. However, I know that any amount of time I put into it will be time well spent.

Q5. What advice would you give to someone thinking about being a Tenant Friend?

The advice would be to go for it if you want to learn, help and be part of something good.

Contact us for more information!





Susan's UPDATE

Since the last time I wrote to you all a lot has happened on Tenants' Voice. We now have several new members, and they are proving an asset to our work.



The most exciting initiative we are working on is setting up a team of Resident Service Inspectors, who will look at things like customer services and repairs and maintenance in detail, and report their findings to Tenants' Voice, with recommendations to improve the overall service to residents.

We have piloted a new resident training scheme to help our residents manage their tenancies, with tips and information on such things as rent, utilities, neighbours and money management. A few of us were given a presentation by Jonathan Routledge, Tenant Liaison Officer, which was interactive and informative. We have made suggestions as to how it can be adapted for our residents, and look forward to launching it in the future.

I attended a Values Day which saw staff, Tenants' Voice members and the Board looking at core values which should give a shared understanding of what the Society stands for. The results of the consultation will then be collated and fed back to Tenants' Voice and the Board for consideration.

We have been given the opportunity to shadow staff in their day to day workings, giving us an insight into how the Society runs.

Finally if there is anything you would like Tenants' Voice to discuss it can be put on the suggestion sheet that is included in this edition of Interlink.

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

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



Tenants' Voice are made up entirely of residents and they are there to represent your views.

To ensure your views and concerns are being voiced, this edition of Interlink includes the Tenants' Voice suggestion form.

By using this form you can write to or contact your local representative who will take up your concerns and make sure they are heard at the next Tenants Voice meeting.

Once you have written on the form, send it to us and we will pass it on to your Tenants Voice representative.

Alternatively, you can email Tenants Voice with the address given on the back of the form.

Anything you say will be treated as confidential and you can choose to remain anonymous if you wish.

Your local Tenants Voice representative

BARROW (1)	DEPDEN (1)	MILDENHALL (1)	SUDBURY (1)
JOAN MATTHEWMAN Tel: 01284 811092	GILL PUGH Tel: 01284 850452	PAULA BONE (VICE CHAIR) Tel: 01638 715529	LISA CUDD Tel: 07792 081456
BURY ST EDMUNDS (4)	IPSWICH (4)	NEWMARKET (2)	THETFORD (1)
ANDY BALFOUR Tel: 01284 765277	BRIAN BALL Tel: 01473 253610	JULIE McGRATH Tel: 01638 603228	CHRIS GILMORE Tel: 01842 764785
DAN CLAXTON Tel: 01284 724177	JOHN CAMPBELL Tel: 01473 278166	SUSAN FEARY (CHAIRPERSON) Tel: 01638 615413	THURSTON (1) ALAN DAGE...
ED COLE Tel: 07932706581	MICHELLE SYMONDS Tel: 01473 420004		
JAN LISTER			

Your suggestions and comments

Do you have a fresh idea of how Suffolk Housing Society can do things better? Or a service you have received from Suffolk Housing Society? Perhaps you think we are doing well and want it mentioned at the next Tenants Voice meeting?

Why not complete this form and send it back to us and we will pass it to your nearest Tenants Voice representative for your nearest representative are listed on the back of this paper if you would like to make contact by email address to contact the group. If there isn't a representative in your area then the nearest representative will be pleased to hear from you.

Your address: _____

Please tick this box if you wish to remain anonymous

Once complete, please return this form to: Tenant Liaison Officer, Suffolk Housing Society, House, St Botolphs Lane, Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk, IP33 2AX

ASB Policy

We recently held a meeting with Tenants' Voice members to review our Anti Social Behaviour (ASB) and Complaints process. As a result of these meetings we will be making a few changes.

ASB – we will be compiling a selection of leaflets that deal with different aspects of nuisance behaviour. The leaflets are intended to offer advice and guidance that will enable tenants to deal with a problem in the first instance themselves and what assistance/action the Society will and will not be able to offer. We will also be looking at how we feed back information and progress to those who have reported nuisance behaviour.

Complaints – we will be reducing the number of stages a complaint goes through and incorporating into the policy the option for a representative of Tenants' Voice to be available at any stage throughout the process to provide support. Tenants' Voice will receive a quarterly report about complaints and a new information leaflet will be produced.



Street Party

The tenants of Oakes Close held a Street Party the day after the wedding of William and Catherine. The Union Jack wavered in the wind, as did the matching bunting put up all around the area. There were tables dressed in red, white and blue and one table had all three colours in the shape of the flag – well done girls! Even the paper plates and serviettes were in line with the royal occasion. It was some 'posh do' I can tell you.

Thirty people were seated at any one time with others coming and going to join in the fun. There was sunshine aplenty, sixties music, barbequed hamburgers and sausages sandwiches, meat balls, mini sausage rolls, savoury snacks and then came the cakes and puddings in various shapes, sizes and fillings as well as fresh fruit. Talking of fresh fruit – the feast ended with extra large strawberries dipped in oceans of melted chocolate and then coated with edible glitter. We will never stop talking about them for a millennium and the picture of Lucy bringing them to the table says it all.

The tables buckled under the weight of all the wonderful goodies and everyone without exception, tucked in and enjoyed every scrap. The tea urn was constantly on the boil and cool drinks were also the order of the day. Thanks (and the word now seems so inadequate) must go out to all for your amazing contributions, support and hard work right from the start of the idea, up to the day itself, and that includes those who were unable to attend.

The photos depict the wonderful atmosphere and the tenants, old and new, got to know one another, which was the main intention, plus they all had the best time – from the eldest to the youngest. It certainly was a great success, so much so that we are even talking of repeating the day for the Queen's Diamond Jubilee next year.

Jan Lister
Tenant Voice Member

What's the Value?



From time to time good organisations should reflect on the services they provide, how far those services meet the needs of customers, and most importantly, what it values the most and what it stands for.

In May, Tenants' Voice sat down with Board members and the staff team at a half day conference to discuss just that. All those at the conference reflected on a time when they had received excellent service; maybe from a shop, insurance company or car show room. They then concentrated on the kinds of words that described that experience and considered which of those words should best apply to SHS services to tenants in the future.

The values, shown below, will form the basis of everything the Society does over the coming years. In particular, how it recruits new staff, how it rewards staff, how it holds itself to account for the services it provides and most importantly, how it works with you in the future.

To provide exceptional homes and services with a local, friendly focus

In doing so we will:

- Value our relationships
- Know our business
- Stay approachable
- Work with efficiency and integrity



It goes without saying that we would like your views on these values. Are they meaningful to you? What should be added or taken away? Any comments should go directly to Ian Winslet, our Chief Executive either by telephoning the office or by email ianw@suffolkhousing.org

Do you get housing benefit?

If so, please let your local housing benefit department know that your rent went up on the 1st July 2011 by either sending or taking your rent increase letter in to them.

Does your housing benefit cover your rent?

If not, you may be able to claim "extra" housing benefit (called a discretionary housing payment) to top up existing benefit. Contact your local housing benefit department and ask them for a discretionary housing payment application form. If you would like assistance in filling in the form you can either contact your local Citizens Advice Bureau or ask Suffolk Housing Society.

Government welfare reforms – will they affect me?

There are a number of reforms to be introduced over the next two years which may have some serious implications for a number of tenants. We have given a brief outline of some of them below.

i) Housing Benefit, it is proposed, will be limited by property size, for working age tenants.

This means that, if under government guidelines, you are "under occupying" your home your housing benefit will be restricted. For example, a couple with one child living in a three bed roomed house would be "under occupying" and may face a cut in their housing benefit.

What can I do? You may need to consider "downsizing" to a smaller property.

ii) The amount deducted from housing benefit for adults, usually son(s) or daughter(s) who live as part of your household will rise steeply.

This means that you will receive less money as part of your benefits.

What can I do? You will need to ensure that your son(s)/daughter(s) pay the amount deducted from your benefit to enable you to pay your rent.

iii) Universal Credit.

A new benefit which it is proposed will replace all means tested benefits in the autumn of 2013.

iv) Personal Independence Payment.

A new benefit, which will be introduced in the autumn of 2013, to replace the existing Disability Living Allowance (DLA). Everybody getting DLA will be re-assessed and it is expected that the amount paid will drop.

Please remember that, whether you get help from housing benefit or not, it is your responsibility to pay your rent.

Don't forget to visit us on www.suffolkhousing.org to:

- request a repair
- pay your rent
- get information about finding a home
- get information on how to swap your home
- get latest news re competitions etc
- read minutes of Tenants' Voice meetings
- read up-to-date and back copies of reports, leaflets and publications