



Gardening Competition Winners

New Customer Service Team

Over the last 12 months we have been working towards improving our front line service to residents. This has resulted in a new Customer Service Team who now deal with your call at the first point of contact. This team has been in place since April 2008 but we wanted to ensure the team were meeting our objectives and that you, the resident, are receiving an improved service. In order to check this we sent a survey form to the 234 residents who contacted us during the middle two weeks in October. 80 forms were returned and we have compared the information to the satisfaction survey we carried out in 2007.

The good news is that 70% of residents feel that the service has improved since the new team has been in place. Other interesting figures revealed that 91% of callers felt that staff were helpful compared to 90% in the previous survey and 80% were satisfied with the outcome of their contact compared with 78%. We still have some work to do but this is a great start.

All forms returned were entered into a draw and the winner of the £15 shopping voucher was Mrs Bishop of Bury St Edmunds.

A large list of enthusiastic residents took part in the 2008 Gardening competition. The independent judge, Geoffrey Ellis, selected the following winners:

'Pots and Planters' - WINNER - Philip and Christine Jackson, Hall Close, Weeting Nr. Brandon. Highly commended entries were also received from Gladys Johnson of St Mary's Close, Mildenhall and Keith Price of Sisters Court, Hadleigh.

'Garden' - WINNER - Jane Kydd, Steward House, Bury St Edmunds. Highly commended entries were also received from Derek Pilgrim of Nunnery Green, Wickhambrook and Hazel Saunders of Bloomfield Way, Debenham.

The two winners have received a prize of a year's subscription to BBC TV's Gardeners World magazine.

Staff update

Since our last edition of Interlink Hannah Jewers has left the Customer Service Team to be a full time mum and Emma Lally joined the section in September.

Another new face is Darryl Durno who joined the Society in October as a Housing Trainee. Darryl will initially be working toward an NVQ2 in Customer Services with the West Suffolk College over the next 12 months. Many of you will have already spoken with Darryl who is spending some time with the Customer Service team, but he will also be joining the Housing Officers on their site and tenancy visits.



Staying Safe

In the home:

Many of us will be making cutbacks this year as the credit crunch takes hold and, as well as other savings, will use last year's Christmas lights and decorations. A few moments carrying out the following checks will help to prevent accidents

Check – never insert or remove bulbs when switched on, always inspect the cables and bulbs for damage and don't use lights that are damaged

Using – always read and follow the manufacturer's instructions, use a residual current device (RCD) for added protection, only use lights outdoors that are specifically for outdoor use, don't let cables become a tripping hazard or run under the

carpets. Don't allow children to play with the lights and always switch them off when you go to bed or out of the house.

Candles can mark special occasions and create a special atmosphere, but they also bring fire into the home so take extra care when using candles in your home. There were over 2,000 house fires directly related to candles in the year 2000 and, as the sales of candles increase, this statistic is going to continue to increase.

- Always put candles on a heat resistant surface in a proper holder, keep them away from draughts and curtains and don't stand them on the TV.
- Put candles out before you leave a room. Never go to sleep with a

candle still burning, and never leave a burning candle or oil burner in a child's bedroom. Candles should be out of reach of children and pets.

- Candles that have been put out can go on smouldering and start a fire. Make sure they're completely extinguished.





Callers to your home:

You are all a very trusting lot, our staff are rarely asked to show their identity cards when visiting residents. All the Society's Staff and contractors carry an ID card and if you have never met the person standing at your door you should ask to see some form of identity. Rogue traders and bogus callers will try a variety of ways to get in your home – if in any doubt about the caller at your door – keep them out.



Getting prepared for winter

We're quite lucky in the UK that our winters, whilst we often think they are long and harsh are actually relatively mild! There are a few basic things you can do before the cold weather starts to set in to avoid inconvenience in the cold.

Things to check / Remember		Check
If you have oil heating check you have sufficient oil for the winter		
If you have a pre payment card meter, have you sufficient credit to see you through? Running out when it's cold and dark is very inconvenient!		
Have you checked all of your windows? Can they all still be closed?		
Is your heating working? Have you tried it on a cooler day?		

In the Community

Stay in well lit areas; please let us know if the car park lights are not working or the lighting needs improving.

Get to know your neighbours and if you haven't already got one perhaps consider becoming a Neighbourhood watch area.

You can get more help and advice from www.homeoffice.gov.uk/crime-victims/how-you-can-prevent-crime or your local Safer Neighbourhood Police team.

Credit Crunch – How could it affect me?

Every time the news is on, the possible effects of the credit crunch are announced. These include not being able to get a loan, losing your job and higher or lower fuel and food costs. Here are a few suggestions:

I've recently lost my job – I can't afford to pay my rent

- Contact Ian Dodds, our Arrears Controller, so he is aware that you are having problems paying your rent. He will sympathetically listen and advise you what to do – telephone 01284 773438
- Contact the local Job Centre so that they are aware you are looking for new employment and can advise you of any benefits you are entitled to
- Contact your local Housing Benefit (HB) office and let them know your circumstances have changed:-
 - If you currently receive HB, they may adjust your entitlement
 - If you're not getting HB at the moment, they will let you know whether you're entitled to it

My gas and electricity bills have gone up – I have less money to pay towards my rent

- Contact Ian Dodds, Arrears Controller, on 01284 773438

- Contact your electricity or gas company for advice
- Look for ways of reducing your fuel consumption
 - Turning appliances off and avoid leaving on standby can save you £30 per year
 - Washing laundry at 30 degrees can save £10 per year
 - Boiling only the amount of water you need can save you £10 per year (figures based on 2 bed mid terraced house) These actions alone can save you £50 per year!
- Use energy efficient light bulbs.

You can get more energy saving advice from PECT Consultancy, which is a non-profit making organisation that works in partnership with Suffolk Housing Society to help you get a better deal on energy costs.

You can contact them on 0800 7834761 and if you have a copy of your latest energy bill they will be able to give you a cost comparison that may surprise you! You can also call the Energy Saving Trust Advice centre Anglia on freephone 0800 513012 or www.energysavingtrust.org.uk

I can't get a loan

Foundation East lend money to new and existing businesses and provide personal loans. You can find out more about the organization by looking at their website www.foundationeast.org, but you will need to speak with your Housing Officer before making an application to them.

Finally, contact your local Citizens' Advice Bureau who offer help with all of the above matters and much more.





News just in!

PECT (mentioned in the credit crunch article) have just secured a new deal with British Gas. Amongst the many benefits that may be available to residents are:

- Access to Essentials energy tariff – enables tenants on prepayment meters to pay at the same rate for energy as those paying on direct debit.
- Price cap for 12 months
- Here to help scheme – offering a range of assistance from benefit health checks and other free services from local charities.
- Free smart meter to help monitor household energy usage.

Phone them on 0800 7834761 to see how they can help you.

Grounds maintenance update

One matter that has come to our attention a lot over the last few months is that you are not happy with the grounds maintenance service. From what you told us the contractor didn't seem to be attending to all of some sites and missing bits of work out of other sites.

In order to deal with this problem a meeting was held in October with Countrywide (the grounds maintenance contractors) to discuss these concerns. Each site drawing was discussed and then updated. Housing Officers will continue to monitor the standard of work and together with regular site walkabouts with the contractor we do hope that there continues to be an improvement in this service. We would still like to hear your views about the service, good or bad, and would ask you to speak to your Housing Officer or contact the Customer Service Team on 01284 767224.

Keep it clean!

Ever keen to do all we can to provide an excellent service to our residents, we undertook a review of our cleaning services earlier this year to decide if improvements could be made. Our main concern was continuity of service during times of absence through sickness or annual leave which was difficult for us to achieve.

As a consequence, it was decided to transfer the entire service to L.A.C. Contractors, who are based in Sudbury and who have sufficient staff to ensure cover for an absent cleaner should it be needed. L.A.C. has also taken over the service from

existing cleaning contractors. The transfer became effective on the 1st September. Some of our residents may not even have been aware of the change as, in many schemes, the cleaner is the same person as before. The difference now is that he or she is employed by L.A.C. Contractors and not the Society.

However..... all of this does not mean that we do not want to hear from you if there is a shortfall in the cleaning service. If you do have a complaint, please continue to report it to your Housing Officer or to the Customer Services Team on 01284 767224.

Choice Based Lettings

You may recall an article in Interlink this time last year to make you aware of Home-Link Choice Based Lettings scheme. Now we want to tell you about a further two schemes. In January 2009 Breckland will launch their scheme, and between February and April 2009 The Greater Haven Gateway scheme is launched which covers homes in Babergh, Ipswich and Mid Suffolk and will be known as Gateway to Homechoice.

The basis of any Choice Based Letting scheme is that in order to be considered for a vacancy applicants will need to be registered on the scheme. The application is assessed

and banded. Any vacancies that occur in the area, whether the landlord is council or housing association, will then be advertised and "bids" sought from the applicant in the specific band. Allocations will then be made to the person in the correct band that has been registered the longest. All transfer requests will be treated in the same way. If you need more information please speak to your Housing Officer.



One man's junk is another man's pride and joy...

Or so the saying goes.

Please make sure that when your tenancy ends that you take all your belongings with you or make arrangements for them to be collected – if you don't do this we will dispose of everything left in the property. This could mean that

treasured possessions are thrown away.

The Society does not have any storage facilities and if belongings have to remain in the property whilst we try to find you this means that the property can't be let to another tenant in the meantime. This is unfair to people waiting for a home and also it is a dreadful waste of money that the Society could make better use of.



Immersion Heater Safety

You may remember some time ago a tragic incident involving the death of a baby caused by a faulty immersion heater thermostat. Such incidents are extremely rare. However we are working with our electrical contractor, Suffolk Electrical, to check thermostats at the same time as our cyclical electrical testing programme.

Beware of the signs of a potentially faulty thermostat:

- Water from the hot taps is excessively hot
- A rumbling or bubbling noise from the hot water cylinder
- Water from the cold taps in your bathroom is unusually warm
- Excessive condensation or steam in your loft

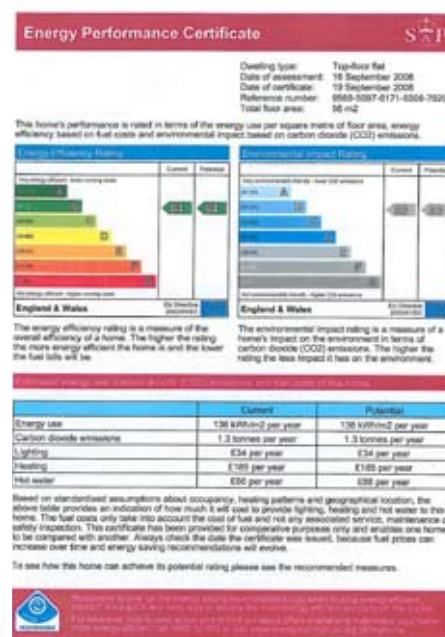
If you notice any of the above you should:

- Turn off your immersion heater immediately
- Open the hot tap on your bath for a few minutes to let some of the hot water out of the system.
- Call the Customer Service Team on 01284 767224

Energy Performance Certificates (EPCs)

From 1st October 2008 we are required to provide an energy performance certificate (EPC), to properties where the tenancy changes. The EPC gives the occupier of the property information on the homes energy efficiency rating and environmental impact. The EPC looks similar to that which comes with a new fridge giving a scale of A to G, A being more energy efficient and G being less efficient.

The EPC details the likely running costs for fuel consumption for the property and also reports on the current performance of key building components such as walls, roof and floors. It will make recommendations of ways to improve the property's energy efficiency. We do have a planned upgrade programme for building components but will be looking at each EPC on an individual basis to see if there are any items we can cost effectively upgrade in the short term.



An example EPC would look like this.



Thinking of buying a new gas cooker?

Please be aware that new regulations came into force on 1st January 2008 that require all flue-less appliances such as cookers and hobs installed in flats, bedsits or maisonettes to have a flame sensing device (FSD) on all burners. The reason is to reduce the potential dangers of a gas leak in multi-occupancy dwellings. This legislation was extended to 1st June 2008 to allow manufactures and suppliers time to supply the new compliant appliances.

If you live in a flat, bedsit or maisonette and are looking to buy a new gas cooker you should tell the shop what type of property you live in as they will only be able to supply you with a certain type of cooker. You may find that this new type of cooker is considerably more expensive than a traditional type.

Please note this new regulation does not affect houses. In addition any gas appliance purchased should only be installed by a Corgi registered engineer and gas cookers should always be fixed to the wall with a chain for safety reasons.

Property facelift

We are well underway with our planned and cyclical maintenance programmes. One of the properties included in this year's programme was Crossways in Mildenhall. This property dates from the early 19th century and is currently used by a supported housing project managed by the National Autistic Society. In addition to a complete external repaint, other work required to bring this property back to its former glory included, recreating a number of window mouldings to match the originals together with more specialist carpentry work.



Tenant meetings

Since our last magazine we have held a number of tenant events where staff from the office meet with residents and the local community.

We didn't see quite so many of our residents during this year's roadshow which visited Sudbury, Hadleigh, Mildenhall, Bury St Edmunds and Ipswich. A total of 36 residents met with us and we dealt with over 130 issues, 40 of these were repairs that were reported to us and 26 grounds maintenance issues.

At the end of October we held our second Village Matters meeting in Clare and met with a couple of residents, a representative from Clare Parish Council and from Clasp, a local charity set up to help Clare residents. We were also joined by the police.

Our next big event will be the Older Tenant Forum on 1st December at the Cedar's Hotel in Stowmarket.

As you will see from the Tenants' Voice article we are launching out in a new way to hear from our residents. We would love to hear from you, if you have any suggestions for events or meetings, or would like to be involved in contributing to Interlink or any of the other tenant events.

Note for your diary

To allow for staff training the office will be closed on Tuesday mornings between 9 and 9.30am.



Free light bulbs

We have recently signed up to an initiative with the Housing Corporation which will mean that between now and August 2009 every one of our residents will be receiving four free energy efficient light bulbs. The light bulbs have all been donated by EDF energy, they use 80% less energy and have a life span of ten years longer than regular bulbs.