

the bridge

THREE RIVERS HOUSING GROUP TENANTS' NEWSLETTER

SPRING EDITION 2005

In brief

- Three Rivers has just completed a major survey of the condition of all its properties. A five-year maintenance plan is now being put into action to ensure that all of our properties continue to meet good quality standards. A special supplement about this plan will be out with the next Issue of The Bridge.
- Watch out for our major two-yearly Customer Service Satisfaction survey which includes a doorstep survey will be carried out for us on behalf by Priority Search this summer.
- Five primary schools in Hartlepool, Sherburn Road in Durham and Dean Bank in Ferryhill have received a number of Three Rivers' older computers for use in their classrooms.
- There is now a £100 cash prize draw once every three months for tenants and other customers who fill in an after-service feedback form to tell us what they think of our repair service. Winners' names will be listed in The Bridge.



Ben Holmes pictured with Nicola and Emile Forde

New home in Westoe beats the Caribbean

NICOLA FORDE and her young son Emile have no complaints about the British weather despite leaving the sunny Caribbean behind them to live in the North East.

For single parent Nicola has received the keys to the house of her dreams in Westoe Crown Village, South Shields. Nicola is thrilled to have a foot on the property ladder thanks to

an increasingly successful shared ownership scheme run by Three Rivers.

Despite working for 30 hours a week as an administration officer for a health trust, Nicola was worried that she would never be able to afford to buy her own home.

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Rent rates increase kept low

THE OVERALL rent - that is the rent and service charge - has increased by an average 2.9%.

We are only increasing them by the rate of inflation as we did last year although the Housing Corporation, our regulator, had allowed the Group to raise its rents by a maximum of 3.6 per cent.

Service charges, which cover the costs

of maintaining and improving your property and communal areas, have fallen by 0.27 per cent.

Rent for Three Rivers' mainstream properties has increased by an average of 3.1% from April this year.

This highlights Three Rivers' commitment to keep rents at an affordable level for our tenants.



Chester-le-Street District Council Leader, Councillor Linda Ebbatson, officially launches the Pelton project. Three Rivers Housing Group's Chair, Peter Gavin, is on the far right of the photo.

Housing boost for Pelton

NEW HOMES created by a partnership between Three Rivers, Chester-le-Street District Council and Haslam Homes at Willow's Edge in Pelton, are putting the heart back into the village.

At the official opening, guests and local residents were invited to view the Haslam Home's showhome and Three Rivers' bungalows. 37 of the total 81 homes will be developed for rent. All tenants of the rented homes will be nominated by the local authority.

Cllr Linda Ebbatson, the Council leader, said: "I know what was here before, and how proud people are of Pelton. These houses are putting the heart back into the village. Pelton has a main line railway, motorway just a mile away and is close to a major conurbation. The potential is great and people realise that this is a lovely place to live."

The Haslam Homes site, near Chester-le-Street is attracting interest

from buyers who already live in the village or who are keen to return but who have previously been unable to find suitable new homes.

Resident Heather Rippon who represents local tenants agreed that the mixture of homes for sale and rent was a good idea: "This is giving back Pelton's identity. The village suffered from the loss of the mines, the same as many villages round here, but the new factories and job opportunities means people are moving back."

Further funds are being allocated to the refurbishment of shops on Front Street.

Chair of the Three Rivers, Peter Gavin, added: "We are glad to be part of the project. Through partnership working and the foresight of Chester-le-Street District Council, we are able to make a positive change for the people in Pelton."

New Board Members

FOUR new people from senior management backgrounds have joined Three Rivers' board of management. This brings the total number of members to 12, two of whom are tenant board members. The purpose of the board is to provide future direction and make high level decisions for the association. The new members are:

Bill Worth

Recently retired Chief Executive of North Durham NHS Trust.



Jan Parkinson

Currently the Strategic Director of Human Resources at Gateshead Metropolitan Council.



Steve Anderson

Recently retired Finance Director of South Tees NHS Trust.



Ian Wardle

Currently the Project Director of Sunnyside Partnership, a project that aims to regenerate and improve the Sunnyside area in Sunderland.



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"We have been living in a privately rented one-bedroom flat since returning from the Caribbean last summer," she explained "and I was worried that I would never be able to buy my own home. Emile is two and a half and needs his own bedroom and I desperately wanted a garden as well. I have always loved this area and my family have connections here but everything was way out of my price range."

Fortunately Nicola's mother, who works for a building society, knew about the shared ownership scheme operated by Three Rivers to help

people buy their own homes. The scheme means that Nicola is able to buy a half share in the two-bedroomed house with a no-deposit mortgage and pay rent for the remaining share to Three Rivers with an option to buy more shares at a later date.

"Emile and I both love this house," said Nicola, "and this is exactly the sort of area where I want to bring up my son. We're already getting to know our neighbours and Emile loves his bedroom, which is being decorated with fire engines. Everything is brand new and having a

garden will be wonderful for him in the summer.

"My application was dealt with really quickly and Ben Holmes from Three Rivers has given me such a lot of support and help. There is no way that we could be living here without this scheme."

Ben Holmes, Commercial Manager at Three Rivers, said: "It is great to see Nicola and Emile settling into their new home. This scheme is designed to help first time buyers who have a regular income but cannot afford a full mortgage."



Tenant's Guide launched

KNOWING what to do when you have a tenancy issue and what we offer at Three Rivers is now made easier with a new and more user friendly Tenant's Guide.

Launched in March to replace the former Tenant's Handbook, the new guide is made up of a series of leaflets including Repairs and

Maintenance to Your Home, Rent and Money Matters and Dealing with Anti-social Behaviour.

Please get in touch with our Customer Services team if you have not received a copy of the guide. Our Supported Housing tenants will have a separate guide launched later in the year.

Moving On

EASTER has just come and gone...so, it's a good time for a fresh start with new initiatives. Speaking of new, we will soon be seeing a new Head of Housing Services soon. The person will play an important role in making sure that we as customers will continue to enjoy a good level of service.

I was most encouraged at the last TAC meeting. The tenants are usually well informed and consulted on a series of

issues at these meetings. But I was particularly interested in discussing what questions should be asked in the two-yearly Customer Satisfaction Survey questionnaire and delighted we were asked BEFORE it goes out to residents in the summer. We were also excited about some of the ideas put forward in the Residents' Annual Conference - so, watch this space!

Paul Nugent
TAC Chair.

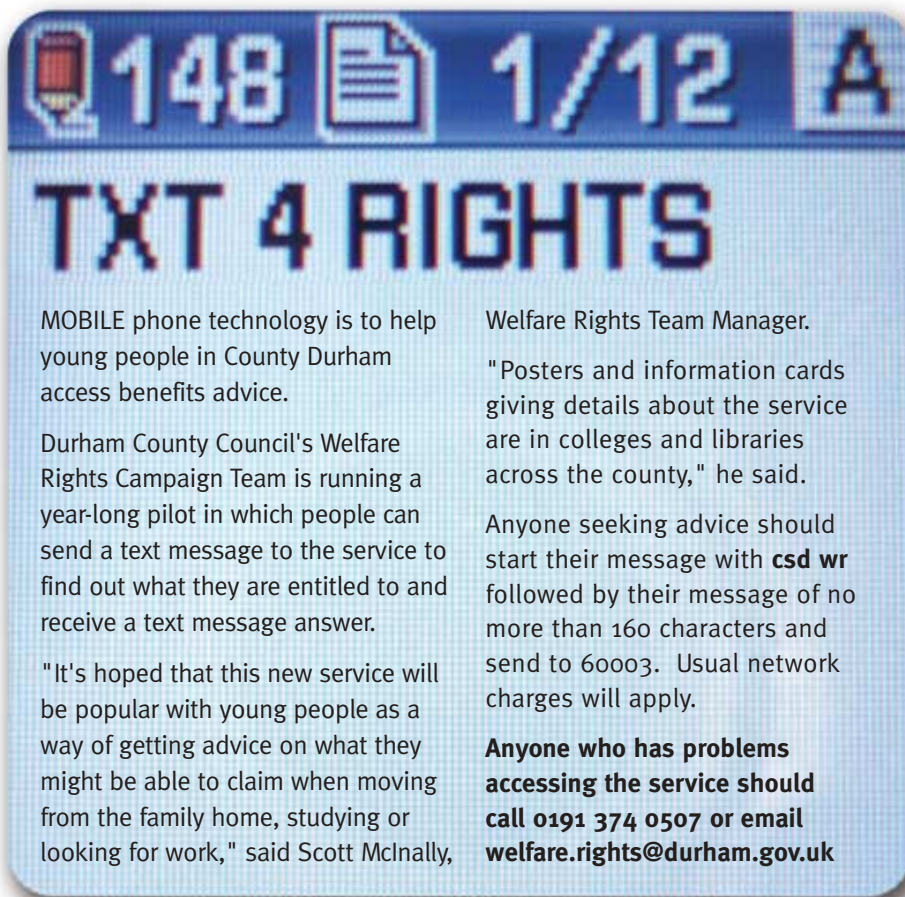


New Children's Centre

A COMMUNITY event kick started consultation on a new Children's Centre with Sherburn Road residents on 14 March at Laurel Avenue School.

Parents in Sherburn Road will benefit from the new centre from April 2006. It replaces the Sure Start programme that will be wound down in the estate next year. Some of the ideas already put forward for the new service include breakfast and after school clubs and parenting courses.

Please contact Paul Wilson at the Bede Centre at Bede Avenue in Sherburn Road if you would like further information or interested in being involved.



MOBILE phone technology is to help young people in County Durham access benefits advice.

Durham County Council's Welfare Rights Campaign Team is running a year-long pilot in which people can send a text message to the service to find out what they are entitled to and receive a text message answer.

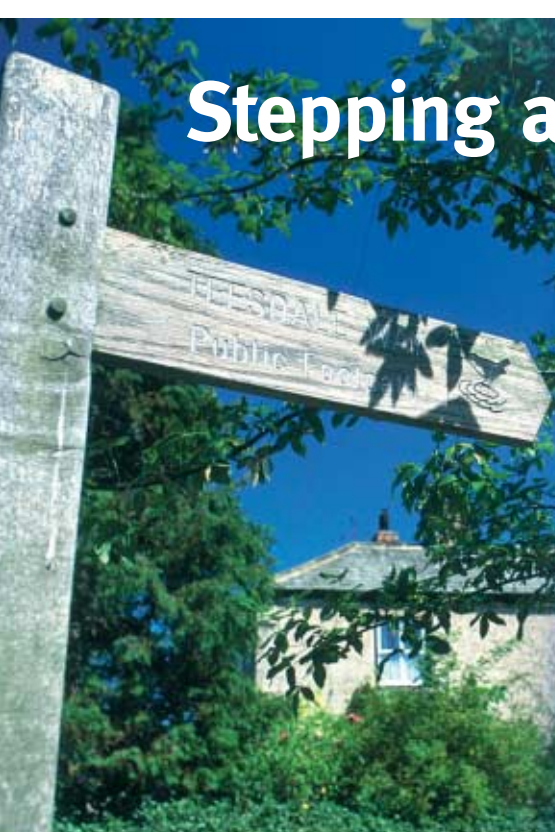
"It's hoped that this new service will be popular with young people as a way of getting advice on what they might be able to claim when moving from the family home, studying or looking for work," said Scott McNally, Welfare Rights Team Manager.

"Posters and information cards giving details about the service are in colleges and libraries across the county," he said.

Anyone seeking advice should start their message with **csd wr** followed by their message of no more than 160 characters and send to 60003. Usual network charges will apply.

Anyone who has problems accessing the service should call 0191 374 0507 or email welfare.rights@durham.gov.uk

Stepping all the way to better health



A BIT of initiative by a group of elderly residents in Sherburn Road estate in Durham has led them to keep fit the scenic way since 2002. With the help of Age Concern, they set up Sherburn Shufflers, a voluntary group working out of the Pelaw View Centre on the estate.

From humble beginnings, the group has grown to 14 members who meet every Friday and take short walks of between two to four miles throughout County Durham and occasionally further afield. All members make a small donation towards travel costs.

County Durham Foundation recently helped to purchase maps and waterproof clothing and further

applications have been made to buy footwear and to cover transport costs.

A new programme of walks and trips has now started including visits to Beamish, the Harrogate Flower Show and the Harperley Prisoner of War Camp. The trips are led by volunteer walk leaders and all walks are risk assessed prior to the group carrying them out.

New members are welcomed and please get in touch with Harry Clouth on 0191 384 9561 if you are interested or if you wish to make a donation to the Sherburn Shufflers. The new programme can be picked up from the Pelaw View Centre.



Gill Cormack

Helping older residents live independently

MEET GILL CORMACK, our new Advice Officer who will be offering advice on the many services and benefits our residents at The Garth and Schooner Court need and can access on a day to day basis. This will help residents maintain a high level of independence - hence the name 'Independent Living Service'.

Gill heads the specialist team which

will ensure that both schemes achieve a high level of service which exceeds the requirements of Supporting People. The service will ensure that services for our older or disabled tenants are much more co-ordinated and responsive to individuals needs.

Why not read a special interview with Gill in the next issue of The Bridge and find out more about the service?

Demand grows as older people benefit from handyman scheme

A GROWING number of older people in Darlington are benefiting from a service that provides help with those vital small repair jobs around the house - from repairing doors and curtain rails to fitting smoke alarms and replacing faulty tap washers.

The Care and Repair Agency's Handyman Service provides an affordable home repair and adaptation service for Darlington residents who are over the age of 60, disabled or vulnerable.

Ms Moira Cruddas is one Darlington homeowner who was unable to find a contractor willing to come and do the small repairs that she needed.

"It is so difficult to get someone in to do this type of job," she said, "so the service is a real boon. Everyone at the agency is so kind and the service is speedy and reliable. I have had a sliding door repaired, rotten floorboards replaced that could have proved dangerous, a pelmet re-fixed and some pipes boxed in."

Moira was particularly grateful that the work carried out by handyman Tom Beadle also helped to ensure the safety of Rose, the puppy she is currently caring for on behalf of Guide Dogs for the Blind.



Moira Cruddas pictured with Handyman Tom Beadle

The scheme, funded by Darlington Borough Council and Darlington Primary Care Trust, is proving particularly popular with ladies over the age of 60 who live alone and may have no family living nearby to help. Clients pay for materials at cost price and, unless they are on means tested benefit, contribute a small labour charge of £5 per hour. The jobs can range from replacing light bulbs and

pull cords, broken toilet seats or small window panes to fitting doorbells, smoke alarms, curtain rails and replacing broken wall tiles.

"It can be so worrying for older people when they can't find anyone to do these small household DIY jobs," explained Lynda Westland of Care and Repair Darlington. "The service isn't designed to do painting, decorating or things that are a landlord's responsibility but it does cover a lot of those little jobs that are important for safety and security. Sometimes, it can play an important part in helping an elderly person live independently in his or her own home."

Please note that the Handyman will **not** carry out jobs that are our responsibility as a landlord.

For further information about the Darlington Handyman Service, please contact Care and Repair Darlington on 01325 460114.



GOING INTO work, off work, working irregular hours, self employed? Worried about your finances? You can get FREE confidential advice from our Benefits Advice Officer on a wide range of benefits, tax credits and tax liability. Why not phone me on 0191 384 1122 or email me at sandra.wyper@threerivershousing.co.uk.



Benefit changes to extend to new areas

RESIDENTS in Tees Valley, Sunderland and County Durham are set to benefit from the government's **Pathway to Work Scheme** from October 2005. However, changes are also afoot for all those claiming incapacity benefits in the near future.

Pathways to Work is a back to work scheme for sick and disabled claimants which combines series of mandatory work focused interviews with a £40 'return to work credit' incentive.

This already operates in seven pilot areas, including Gateshead and South Tyneside, for new claimants. Some existing claimants on incapacity benefit, severe disablement allowance and income support (via a claim for sickness) will be required to participate in Pathways to Work from February this year in these areas.

If your claim started in the two years before the pilot began in April 2004, you will be required to take part in three work-focused interviews (new

claimants have six) and then attend repeat interviews from time to time.

These interviews are to explore the barriers to work and ways that they can be resolved. This could be for example, the provision of specialised equipment at the work place. Information on in-work benefits should also be available and the possibility of retaining the right to return to the same level of benefit if you become ill again will be checked and explained.

Specialist Personal Advisers are now in all JobCentre Plus areas and will be available nationwide by 2006.

In all JobCentre Plus areas, anyone claiming a benefit for incapacity will be required to complete an 'action plan' and have a work-focused interview eight weeks into their claim. GPs will be involved in encouraging patients return to work and there will be improved arrangements for fitness for work advice which will include employment advisers in GP's surgeries.

Permitted work rules

THERE are also changes to the **Permitted Work** rules which are aimed at simplifying current provision of benefits. Anyone doing permitted work will have to complete an action plan committing them to consider moving on into full time work and permitted work at the higher level (ie. working less than 16 hours a week and earning no more than £72), will be allowed in all cases for 52 weeks instead of the present 26 weeks. The action plan will have to be reviewed after 26 weeks. People with severe disabilities (e.g. someone with a progressive condition) will be allowed to work for longer while staying on benefit.

Further major changes are planned to be introduced in 2008 subject to successful trials. These include replacing incapacity benefit with two new benefits and incorporating the work-focused claim process that is part of the Pathways to Work scheme.

Incapacity benefit will become a **'rehabilitation support allowance'** for the majority of claimants who have a manageable condition and a **'disability and sickness allowance'** for people whose condition is severe.

These changes will be highlighted in future editions of The Bridge, but if you have any concerns about the way your benefits may be affected, please contact Sandra who will be able to give you confidential advice.

Success as Three Rivers tackles anti-social behaviour

WE ARE slowly but surely winning the battle against anti-social behaviour.

A survey undertaken by Three Rivers shows that our strong policy on anti-social behaviour (ASB) is having an effect and making life safer and more pleasant for our residents.

The survey, covering 2004, shows that we are recording a relatively low rate of ASB incidents compared to other organisations and that improvements continue to be made.

Around 75 per cent of Three Rivers' tenants surveyed say that they live peaceably in their homes and this is a five percent improvement over the previous year's figures. The number of tenants who felt they had a serious ASB problem dropped to 17 per cent from 20 per cent in 2003 and the number of actual serious incidents fell by 27 per cent.

"This survey is good news for us and



for our tenants," said Pete Ottowell, Three Rivers' Operations Director. "We take anti-social behaviour very seriously indeed. It can range from

noise, conduct that causes a nuisance, damage and aggressive language to violent or threatening behaviour, intimidation, criminal behaviour and the unlawful use of a home for an activity such as drug selling."

Three Rivers' ASB policy starts with a careful assessment of all tenants before property is allocated. Dealing with issues of vandalism, graffiti, litter and fly dumping is given a high priority and there is a zero tolerance policy towards racial and other harassment.

"We have a procedure in place to deal with all complaints thoroughly and within certain time limits," said Pete "We place equal importance on prevention so we support local activities for

young people to help stop them drifting into ASB and work closely with the police, local authorities and other agencies."

MAKING HEADWAY WITH GAS SERVICING

THREE RIVERS Housing Group is legally required to service the gas heating appliances in your home every 12 months to ensure they are operating safely and efficiently. This work could save you money and more importantly, your life. So, it is very important that we gain access into your home to carry out the safety checks.

Since we introduced the new procedure as detailed in one of our issues of The Bridge last year, the number of overdue services has improved considerably from 96 to 24.

At present Three Rivers are taking court action with three tenants for failing to allow access to their homes. These tenants run the risk of having their homes repossessed.

Special Notice...

ALAN WILKINSON from Quality Assurance Services will be visiting a selection of Three Rivers' properties over the next nine months to carry out a quality assessment check on our gas servicing provision. Alan will be carrying a CORGI identification and will either be asking a series of short questions or carrying out a full strip down of your boiler. If Alan visits you, your co-operation will be much appreciated in allowing him access to your home.

Art Competition

In the last issue, we invited tenants to submit art pieces themed the "Spring Season". The winners for the competition are:

Adult Category

Mrs F Noble,
Thornhill Place in Hartlepool



Supported Housing Category

Ms G Eason,
Pinehill in Middlesbrough



Children under Five Category

Miss A Burns (aged two),
Pallion in Sunderland



Goodbye and thankyou

LONG-STANDING managers at Three Rivers - Neil Brown, Customer Services Manager, and Rob Johnson, Asset and Maintenance Manager - have gone to new pastures in their career. Many customers will have met or spoken with Neil and Rob in their many years here at Three Rivers. We wish them well in their future careers.

We have made temporary arrangements to cover their posts while we wait for our new Head of Housing Services, Dale Thompson, to join us at Three Rivers. Watch out for an exclusive interview with Dale in the next issue of The Bridge.



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Meet the Customer Service Adviser team

Our Customer Service Advisers are the people you speak to when you ring 0191 384 1122. Each of these Advisers will deal with you to apply for housing, report a repair, help a complaint or enquiry about anything relating to your tenancy. They have a reputation for providing a friendly service and they will try their best.



Sarah Hope



Steve Walton



Laura McGee



Annette Aldred



Claire Rourke



Jilly Towe