

Caerphilly Homes

Spring Issue 11

Help us 'Shape Your Place'



Visitors meeting the owls from Ebbw Vale Owl Sanctuary at the Phillipstown Shape Your Place event.

Lots of you have been meeting with us and giving your views over the past few months at a number of 'Shape Your Place' consultation events and activities held throughout the county borough. This consultation has been held as part of our Welsh Housing Quality Standard (WHQS) Environmental Improvement Programme.

The WHQS is a set of standards which all local authority and housing association homes in Wales must meet by 2020; it includes an environmental standard which aims to ensure that tenants' homes are located in attractive and safe communities. The council's WHQS Environmental Improvement Programme will see around £10 million invested into estates throughout the county borough.

Projects completed so far as a result of consultation include the installation of a dropped kerb in Porset Park, Caerphilly, resurfacing of a car parking area in Hill Road, Pontlottyn and fencing around the entrance to Greensway in Abertysswg.



Specific consultation events have also been carried out at a number of sheltered housing schemes to coincide with internal and external WHQS improvements. Environmental improvements completed at sheltered schemes include new benches at Y Glyn, Maesycwmmmer and enhancements to the communal garden at St Clare's in Rhymney to enable tenants with mobility issues to take part in planting and vegetable growing.

Other projects which have been approved include upgrades to the skate park, an outdoor gym and additional parking in Penyrheol, Caerphilly. There are also plans to improve roundabouts in Churchill Park, Caerphilly following a door knocking exercise. Plans in Panside, Newbridge include remedial work on the Woodland Park and upgrading the play park in Willow Court. The green area next to the play park in Ty Sign, Risca will be developed with benches and pathways to encourage community use. There are proposals to develop a wildlife pathway on the estate between Holly Road and Elm Drive. Repairs are also planned to the square in Trinant, Crumlin along with improvements to play facilities on the estate.

For more information or to give ideas for how your local area could be improved search for 'WHQS Environmental Improvement Programme' at www.caerphilly.gov.uk or contact the officers on 01443 864398 / 866231 / 864002.



Bird box making at the Penyrheol Shape Your Place event.

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Caerphilly Homes



Don't miss your central heating service

We want to warn tenants that we will force entry into your homes, if necessary, to carry out overdue safety checks on central heating systems. We're taking this tough approach to ensure the safety of you, our tenants. Tenants receive an initial telephone call from a council appointed heating contractor to arrange a convenient appointment for the servicing to take place; this is followed up with a letter confirming the appointment. If an appointment cannot be arranged over the telephone a letter is sent to the tenant offering an appointment. If the tenant is not at home for the appointment, we will send a further letter.

We also carry out background checks to see if there are any reasons why a tenant may not be able to contact us, such as in the case of vulnerable tenants.

A Notice Seeking Possession will be served on the property and if no contact is received, a final letter is sent to the tenants informing them that the council will attend their home and force entry if necessary in order to carry out servicing. Please note that tenants will also be liable for costs associated with the forced entry if they fail to provide us with access in advance of this stage.

The council's Tenancy Agreement includes the provision to enter a property either by arrangement with the tenant or after giving reasonable written notice in order to carry out servicing of any installation or items in the property for which the council is responsible.



Cllr Lisa Phipps, the council's Cabinet Member for Homes and Places, said "Forcing entry into a tenant's home is a last resort but is necessary in order for us to meet our obligations as a landlord and, most importantly, to protect the safety of our tenants and their families. We have had to force entry into a number of homes over recent weeks to undertake servicing and we're keen to minimise the number of incidents where this occurs. The council makes every effort to contact tenants before this stage is reached and I would urge people to make sure they do not miss their annual heating service."

If you have missed your annual servicing appointment please call 01443 864290 as soon as possible.

Payment cards for rent and council tax

Caerphilly County Borough Council will soon be changing the system it uses to process payments of rent and council tax.

If you usually have a receipt for your rent or council tax payment printed on a Council Payment Card, this facility will no longer be available when we switch to the new system. However, we will issue you with an individual

paper receipt for each payment on request, and you will be able to ask for a printed statement listing the payments you have made over a given time period.

New rent payment cards will not be issued to council tenants once the new system is in place which is expected to be in the spring.

Why not switch to Direct Debit?



To save the time and expense of visiting us to make your payments, why not switch to Direct Debit? Please download a direct debit form from www.caerphilly.gov.uk or contact the Rents team on 01443 811450 for advice on paying rent by direct debit. To arrange to pay your council tax by direct debit call 01443 863006.

The roll out of Universal Credit

Universal Credit is currently being rolled out throughout the UK and is expected to go live in the Caerphilly county borough in September 2018.

Universal Credit is a new means tested benefit for people of working age. You can get Universal Credit if you're unemployed but also if you're working.

It replaces the following benefits:

- Income support
- Income based Jobseeker's Allowance
- Income related Employment and Support Allowance
- Housing Benefit
- Child Tax Credit
- Working Tax Credit



How will it affect me?

Only new claims or changes in circumstances for any of the above benefits will be affected initially. If you are eligible for Universal Credit you'll get a single payment each month, rather than weekly or fortnightly. Also, instead of getting a separate housing benefit payment,

your housing costs will be paid directly to you as part of your monthly Universal Credit payment. Whilst this does make things simpler, it may mean you have to change the way that you manage your money each month.

How will my rent be paid?

Under Universal Credit housing costs will be paid directly to you and not your landlord, i.e. the council. This means that you will have to pay your rent from the Universal Credit payment you receive each month. To make this

easier you could set up a direct debit for your rent. You can do this by downloading a form from www.caerphilly.gov.uk or by calling our Rents team on 01443 811450.

How do I apply?

Universal Credit is claimed and managed online; you can apply here www.gov.uk/apply-universal-credit. You will have to log into your account regularly and update your records. If you are unemployed you will also be appointed a Work Coach at the Jobcentre.

If you don't have access to the internet or are not confident using computers you can visit your local library.

Supporting our tenants

The Tenancy Support Officers (TSOs) continue to assist our tenants in their own homes with resolving a wide range of issues they may need advice and support with. This support can range from assisting with claims for housing benefits and Discretionary Housing Benefits to accessing foodbanks at times of crisis and providing advice to reduce energy bills.

Last year the TSOs visited and supported 2,183 tenants and secured financial savings of £338,143 for tenants. The

team also provided 353 tenants with energy advice to help reduce their gas and electric bills.

The TSOs are also increasingly assisting tenants who have made a claim for Universal Credit with advice and support on budgeting.

If you require support please contact the Rents section on 01443 811450 to arrange a visit.

Focus on the Housing Improvement Partnership (HIP)



The Housing Improvement Partnership (HIP) is a group of tenants who work with us to improve services at Caerphilly Homes. The HIP focusses on real experiences of tenants and leaseholders when they request and receive a service. The HIP offers a fresh pair of eyes to understand what matters to tenants; providing valuable information to help officers and improve services.

Ian Powell, from Gilfach, has been a member of the HIP since it began in April 2015. He said "During my time on the group we have compiled 4 staff handbooks and we've received excellent comments from officers and Councillors on what's been achieved. I feel, as a tenant on this group, that the council has listened to our suggestions and where possible have implemented them.

Being a member of the HIP I have made new friends, I look forward to our regular meetings and have an insight into how social housing works. Also, I've been able to attend other meetings such as the Tenant Information Exchange and events arranged by TPAS Cymru."

Since it started, the HIP has reviewed 4 services and as a result of its work, changes have been made to the way we do things. Here are just a few:

What tenants told us.....	What we did.....
Landlord consent "I want to make my request using the communication channel of my choice"	Now, you can speak to your housing officer (when they visit you), call into your local housing office, telephone, write or email your request for consent.
Tenancy Support "I want you to tell me who will be visiting and listen to me if I have a preference on who visits"	Now, when we book a Tenant Support Officer appointment with you we will tell you the name of the officer who'll be visiting and discuss with you if you have a preference as to who visits.
Income Recovery "Throughout the process I want you to use language I understand" "I want you to clearly explain why something has happened and what I can do to resolve the problem / fix it"	We've changed our letters to make them clearer and easier to understand.

The Mutual Exchange update will be completed soon; look out for updates in a future edition of this newsletter.

The HIP usually complete 2 reviews a year, with each review taking up to 6 half days. They are relaxed, friendly sessions which help improve services for all tenants. If you are interested in taking part, we will provide you with

any support you need – including transport costs.

For more information contact the Tenant and Community Involvement Team on 01443 811433 / 811434. You can also text us on 07919 627530 or email us at tenantinvolvement@caerphilly.gov.uk

New contact telephone numbers

Some of our main contact numbers have changed to those below:

Eastern Valleys Area Housing Office 01495 235974

Older Persons' Housing - 01443 811431

Rents - 01443 811450

Tenant & Community Involvement Team - 01443 811438

Complaints - 01443 811437

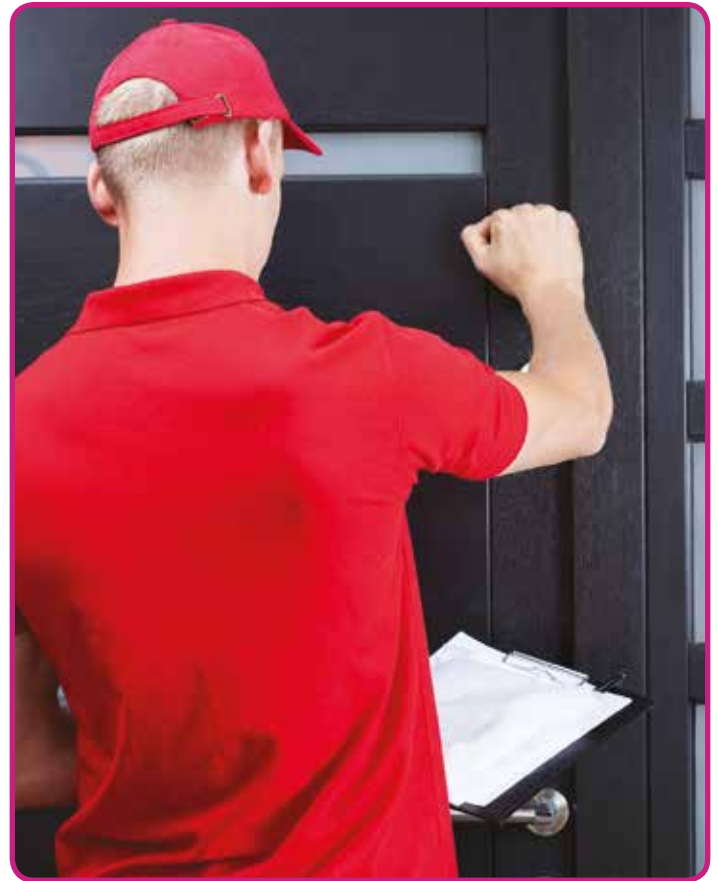
Leaseholder Services - 01443 811439

Protect yourself and your home from bogus callers

We sometimes receive reports of tenants who've been targeted by bogus callers, including incidents where callers have pretended to work for the council or for one of our contractors. Please remember – all council and contractor staff should carry identification and will not mind if you ask to see it. Also, be aware that you should never be asked for payment by any of our staff or contractors for repairs or improvements carried out at your home.

There are also a number of legal companies who cold call tenants, offering to support with claims for disrepair against us. Please be aware that if you make a claim against the council for disrepair, you will be liable for legal costs if the claim is discontinued. Unfortunately there have been a number of cases where tenants have found themselves with large bills to pay. Also remember that, as part of your Tenancy Agreement, you must let us know quickly if you need any repairs and allow us in to inspect and complete the repair.

If you're concerned about any callers to your home do not allow them access and contact your local housing office. You can also report any concerns to the council's Trading Standards team which can be done online by searching 'Doorstep crime and rogue traders' at www.caerphilly.gov.uk or by calling 01443 811300.



The National Minimum Wage – are you getting it?

By law, almost all workers aged 25 and over must be paid at least the National Living Wage, or, if younger, the National Minimum Wage. The Government usually increases the minimum wage rates annually on 1st April. Workers that are being paid at or slightly above the National Minimum Wage or Living Wage could still be missing out. This can happen if their employer makes mistakes in calculating pay. Common errors include:

- **Paying staff at the wrong rate** by failing to implement annual rate increases, such as missing their birthdays meaning they are not moving workers from one age band to another. Errors can also happen when the apprentice rate is applied incorrectly.
- **Making deductions or payments connected to the job** which can take pay below the legal rates. For example, asking staff to pay for uniforms, meals, tools or safety clothing.
- **Including tips, shift allowances or bonuses** as a part of a worker's pay to bring their pay up to National Minimum Wage rates.
- **Unpaid working times** which are additional hours worked but not paid. These can be regular periods of time such as time spent helping to shut up a shop or clearing security after a worker's shift has ended.

- **Worker status errors** by mistakenly treating workers as either volunteers or self-employed. To find out more about self-employed status for workers search on www.gov.uk.
- **Charging workers for accommodation** and not applying the £44.80 weekly accommodation offset allowance correctly. The accommodation offset is the amount allowed to be deducted before it impacts a worker's pay for the purpose of National Minimum Wage. For more information about accommodation offset search at www.gov.uk.
- **Not paying a worker** for time spent training, travelling between appointments or other working time.

What you can do

If you are unsure whether you or someone you are helping is being paid the correct National Minimum Wage you can ask them to call the Acas Helpline on 0300 123 1100 to get more advice. Alternatively workers can make an online complaint at www.gov.uk by searching for 'Pay and work rights complaints'. HMRC will not tell the employer a worker's name without their permission.

Transformation continues in Lansbury Park



Homes in Lansbury Park before energy efficiency works.

December saw phase 2 begin on the programme to improve the energy efficiency of homes in Lansbury Park. This work will not only transform the appearance of properties and the estate, but will also help to address fuel poverty by making homes more thermally efficient whilst also reducing the impact of carbon emissions. Funding for this work is being provided by Welsh Government as part of their Arbed programme. Further funding for this programme has been provided from our Welsh Housing Quality Standard (WHQS) investment programme.

We also successfully received the 'Regional Energy Efficiency Large Scale Project of the Year' award at the Wales Regional Energy Efficiency Awards 2018 for our joint project, with E.ON, to improve Lansbury Park.

In addition to the energy efficiency works, council owned homes in Lansbury Park will also be receiving some additional external improvements needed to bring them up to WHQS.

All external and energy efficiency improvements in Lansbury Park are expected to be completed by March 2019.

We were delighted to welcome Rebecca Evans, Minister for Housing and Regeneration, to Lansbury Park in November. During her visit Mrs Evans viewed the energy efficiency works taking place to homes and



Lansbury Park homes after energy efficiency works.

also found out more about further plans to transform the estate and the lives of local residents. This includes recommendations included in the Lansbury Park 'Deep Place Plan' which was produced by Professor Dave Adamson and Dr Mark Lang last year. The Deep Place Plan was commissioned by the council and supported by Caerphilly Public Services Board. Dr Lang explained the report's findings to Mrs Evans at the recent visit and provided an overview of the range of recommendations it includes to help tackle some of the key issues identified through the 'Deep Place Study' that was undertaken.



L – R: Karl Rivers (CCBC), Karen James (CCBC), Dr Mark Lang, Cllr Lisa Phipps, Cllr Barbara Jones, Rebecca Evans AM, Shaun Couzens (CCBC), Jane Roberts-Waite (CCBC), Sean Rees (CCBC)

Housing Repair Operations team runner up in national performance awards

Congratulations to our Housing Repair Operations team who was once again shortlisted for a Best Performer award for building maintenance innovation in the 2017 APSE Performance Networks Best Performer Award. The APSE Performance Networks Awards recognise 'Best Performers' and 'Most Improved Performers'

across frontline local government services on a range of cost and quality performance indicators, promoting excellence and continuous improvement.

The Housing Repair Operations team was recognised for innovation in their approach to mobile working.

Caerphilly churches unite to provide shelter to homeless

Churches in the Caerphilly county borough united again to provide shelter to the homeless this winter. The Caerphilly Churches Night Shelter project is run in partnership with Caerphilly County Borough Council's Housing Advice Team, Cornerstone Support Services Ltd and local churches.

Now in its sixth year, Caerphilly Churches Night Shelter saw nine churches and a team of volunteers work to provide shelter, hot meals, essential support and advice to the homeless during the most difficult months of the year.

In January Cllr Lisa Phipps, the council's Cabinet Member for Homes and Places, spent an evening with night shelter volunteers at St Helen's Roman Catholic Church in Caerphilly. Wayne David MP also attended, along with Bedwas, Trethomas and Machen Community Councillors Jill Winslade and Amanda McConnell.

Cllr Phipps said "The success of Caerphilly Churches Night Shelter relies upon the efforts of the church co-ordinators and volunteers; without them the project would not be possible. I'd like to thank the volunteers at St Helen's Church



Cllr Phipps, Wayne David MP, Community Councillors Jill Winslade & Amanda McConnell with volunteers at St Helen's church, Caerphilly.

for the warm welcome they gave us and can I also thank all of the churches and volunteers involved across the county borough. It was an incredibly worthwhile experience spending time here at the night shelter; finding out more about the support being provided and meeting the guests."

Caerphilly Churches Night Shelter was operational from 3rd December 2017 until 1st March 2018. If anyone is aware of someone who may be sleeping rough, they can contact our Housing Advice Centre on 01443 873552 or Andrew Clarke from Cornerstone Support Services Ltd on 07946 537777.

Could you help us improve this newsletter?

Become an Armchair Reviewer

Armchair Reviewers are tenants who give us feedback on this newsletter and other ways we communicate with tenants, all from their comfort of their own homes. Every time an Armchair Reviewer gives us feedback they're entered into a prize draw to win a £25 high street shopping voucher!

If you'd be interested in becoming a CSIM or an Armchair Reviewer, or to find out about other opportunities to get involved, contact our Tenant and Community Involvement Team on 01495 235011 / 235557 or by emailing tenantinvolvement@caerphilly.gov.uk

The Right to Buy is ending

The Right to Buy will end for all council tenants in Wales on 26th January 2019; this means that you will not be able to apply to buy your council home after this date. This will not affect your tenancy in any other way.

The Right to Buy will end for “new homes” only on 24th March 2018. A “new home” is one which has not been let as social housing for the six months before 24 March 2018, for example a new build property, or a home that has been recently acquired by the landlord.

In order to qualify for the Right to Buy you must have rented your home from a public sector landlord, e.g. the council, a housing association or NHS Trust, for five years. This doesn't have to be five years in a row and can include time spent in different homes and with different landlords. The Right to Buy allows eligible secure tenants of local councils to buy their home at a discount from the market value; the maximum discount available is £8,000.

If you are able to exercise a right to buy your home, you can submit your application up to, and including, 25th January 2019. Any application made after this date will not be accepted.

If you're applying close to 25th January 2019, you may wish to send your application to us by recorded delivery, or deliver it in person to ensure it arrives by the deadline date. You must take care to make sure that all the details on the application form are correct. If they are not, then your application may be turned down. With this in mind, allow as much time as possible to resolve any issues that may arise.

For more information on the Right to Buy, search for 'Right to Buy' at www.caerphilly.gov.uk or contact the council's Legal Department on 01443 864221 or 01443 863097/8.

WHQS progress continues



Mr & Mrs Rosser.

Our Welsh Housing Quality Standard (WHQS) programme is progressing well, with over 70% of tenants' homes having now received internal improvements and 35% having benefitted from external works. Currently 7,619 properties from the council's total housing stock of 10,803 met the WHQS standards internally, with 3,700 having received external improvements. We also delivered 419 specific adaptations to tenants' homes this financial

year, to make sure homes meet the needs of individual tenants.

One couple who benefited from such adaptations are David and Susan Rosser from Machen. Mr and Mrs Rosser received the keys for their council owned bungalow in May 2017, after needing to downsize from their house. Soon after moving into their new home they were visited by an Occupational Therapist and Surveyor from the council's WHQS team. The team worked with Mr and Mrs Rosser to design a new kitchen around their requirements and also recommended the bath be replaced with a walk-in shower, to better meet the health needs of Mrs Rosser. A path and handrail were also installed in the back garden to make it easier and safer for the couple to reach the washing line.

Mr Rosser said "We were really impressed by the colour options we were offered for the kitchen and bathroom, and we're so happy with the finished work. Everybody who visited as part of the works bent over backwards to help us; from the Occupational Therapist, Surveyor and Foreman to the workforce who carried out the work – they were all excellent. We recently finished decorating the rest of the bungalow and are really settling into our new home."

Whilst we do our best to make sure that the information in this newsletter is accurate, we can sometimes get things wrong; please always check with us first!