

Homelife

Summer/
Autumn
2009

Issue 17

News, views and information for tenants and leaseholders of Sandwell Homes

Community Chest success

Following the popularity of last year's scheme, the board of Sandwell Homes has approved the Community Chest fund for another year.

This means that £5,000 has been earmarked for each of the six towns of Sandwell to support small scale projects that add value to the community.

During 2008/09, more than 200 community groups and individuals applied for funding with 81 being successful.

A silver surfers group, a fishing club and an arts and crafts group for vulnerable and disabled people are just some of the successful projects making a positive impact in the local community.

Grants of up to £500 can be applied for to support one-off bids associated with a project. Schemes such as youth activities, sports events, community environmental and good neighbourhood projects are eligible to apply.

Application packs can be obtained by calling the administration team on 0121 569 5191.

For more information, contact Gail Ashfield, community involvement officer on 0121 569 5046/5140, on mobile 07973 704751, or email gail_ashfield@sandwellhomes.org.uk

The closing date for applications is Friday 25 September.



Members of the customer services team promote the new 'Golden Number'.

New way to get in touch

From Monday 7 September, there's a new way to get in touch with Sandwell Homes – our 'Golden Number' 0121 569 6000. The new number will be introduced for all customer enquiries, and will operate from 8.00am – 8.00pm, Monday to Friday.

A team of specially trained employees at our customer services centre based at the operations and development centre at Roway Lane, Oldbury will be the first point of contact for all general enquiries as well as bidding for properties and making rent payments.

When the number is dialled, the caller will be asked to choose from a menu of options:

- Repairs and gas
- Rent account enquiries
- Homelessness enquiries
- General enquiries

Once an option is selected, the call will be put through to the relevant team to deal with the enquiry. If there is a queue, the customer will have the option to request a call back, rather than wait.

A telephone interpreting service

is available. For deaf and hearing impaired customers a Typetalk service is also available.

Emails, website enquiries and text messages will also be passed to these teams to deal with.

We will monitor this service closely to ensure it is delivering on its promises. We will respect you as a customer and treat you with courtesy at all times. We have also put checks in place to protect the confidentiality of all the information we hold.

There will still be specialist officers and teams available to deal with the more complex enquiries. There will also be some direct telephone lines, in use, when officers are working with a customer on a specific enquiry and it makes sense for the customer to contact them directly.

Why have we done this?

As part of our continuing commitment to 'listen and learn' from you, our customers, Sandwell Homes is introducing some major changes that will make it easier than ever to contact us.

Our research has shown us that an increasing number of customers are choosing to contact us via the telephone, instead of visiting neighbourhood or estate offices.

A small but growing proportion of customers are also choosing to contact us using email or through our website.

Before, there was a wide range of telephone numbers and email addresses that customers were offered, including separate numbers for repairs for each town, for neighbourhood and estate offices, for complaints, as well as a general enquiry line.

continued on page 2





Welcome to the new-look Homelife.

In a bid to provide you with more information about Sandwell Homes and the services we provide to tenants and leaseholders, Homelife now has more pages and is in a larger format to make it easier to read.

At Sandwell Homes, we always value feedback about the quality of the services and information we deliver.

The back page contains a readers' survey. Please take a few minutes to fill out the questionnaire and let us know your views about what you think of this edition and what you would like to see in future editions. You might be one of our prize draw winners.

One of my most pleasurable recent tasks was to visit the prize-winning garden of tenant Pam Smith in Oldbury and looking at the category winners. It is lovely to see the way people really make an effort to bring some colour into their gardens and especially those who make the best of communal and flatted areas.

It is excellent that we get so many entries and every year we have new gardeners anxious to show-off their efforts.

Brian Oakley,
Chief Executive, Sandwell Homes

If you would like a copy of Homelife translated or require a copy in Braille, Large Print or Audio Tape, please contact 0121 569 6030.

Arabic

يُرْجَى الاتصال على رقم 0121 569 6030 إذا كنت تريد نسخة مترجمة من HomeLife [هوملايف] أو إذا كنت تطلب نسخة مطبوعة بطريقة بريل أو بحروف كبيرة، أو نسخة صوتية.

Bengali

"যদি আপনার গৃহজীবন [HomeLife] পুস্তিকার একটি অনূদিত কপির অথবা ব্রেইল, বড় হরফের ছাপা অথবা অডিও টেপের সংস্করণের প্রয়োজন হয়, তাহলে অনুগ্রহ করে 0121 569 6030 নম্বরে যোগাযোগ করুন।"

Kurdish-Kurmanji

Eger te bivêêt kopyeka vê docyumentê (Homelife) bi renekê wergêray, yan ager te pêtvîy kopyeka dest nvysy hebêêt bi renekê brayil yan bi pytên mezin yan bi rengê kasêta tomar krybyt hevbandyê bi hežmara telefonê bke 0121 569 6030.

Kurdish-Sorani

ئەگەر کۆپیەکی دوکیومێنتی (Homelife) بەشیوەیەکی وەرگیردراو دەوێت یان ئەگەر دەتەوێت کۆپیەکی دەست نووست هەبێت بە شیوەی برابەر یان پیتی گەورە یان کاسیتی تومارکراو تکایە پەیوەندی بکە بە ژمارە تەلەفۆنی 0121 569 6030.

Punjabi

"ਜੇ ਤੁਸੀਂ ਹੋਮਲਾਈਫ [Home Life] ਦੀ ਅਨੁਵਾਦ ਕੀਤੀ ਹੋਈ ਇੱਕ ਕਾਪੀ ਚਾਹੁੰਦੇ ਹੋ ਜਾਂ ਤੁਹਾਨੂੰ ਇਸਦੀ ਕਾਪੀ ਦੀ ਬ੍ਰੇਲ, ਵੱਡੇ ਪਿੰਟ ਜਾਂ ਅੱਡੀਓ ਟੇਪ ਵਿਚ ਲੋੜ ਹੈ, ਤਾਂ ਕਿਰਪਾ ਕਰਕੇ 0121 569 6030 'ਤੇ ਸੰਪਰਕ ਕਰੋ।"

Somali

"Haddii aad jeclaan lahayd nuqul ah Nololsha Guriga [HomeLife] oo tarjuman ama aad dooneyso nuqul ah Luuqadda indhoolayaasha, Daabacaad weyn ama Cajalad dhegeysi, fadlan la xariir 0121 569 6030."

Urdu

"اگر آپ کو خانگی زندگی [HomeLife] کے ترجمے کی یا اس کی بریل، موٹے حروف یا آڈیو ٹیپ میں ضرورت ہے تو برائے مہربانی 0121 569 6030 پر رابطہ کریں۔"

School Run?

Does September see you back doing the morning 'school run'?

If the answer is yes, don't forget you can book your repairs appointment around this time.

Just mention it when you contact us and we can make sure no-one calls before 9.30am or your estimated return time.

continued from page 1

You told us that this made it difficult to know the correct number to ring, and it also makes it difficult for us to ensure that these enquiries are being dealt with consistently and within our service standards.

Useful Contact Numbers:

General enquiries
Mondays to Fridays
8.00am – 8.00pm
0121 569 6000

Emergency out-of-hours
0800 844112

Community alarms and warden services
0121 500 5500

Tenancy support service
9.00am – 5.30pm
North: Tipton, Wednesbury,
West Bromwich
0121 569 2662
0121 569 2663
0121 569 2665

South: Oldbury, Smethwick,
Rowley Regis
0121 569 2652
0121 569 2661
0121 569 2664

Homelessness emergency
out-of-hours **0121 525 4688**



Jayne Maull and Derek Fletcher.

The new voice of Sandwell Homes is Jayne Maull, who beat off 13 other employees for the honour of recording a new set of telephone messages to go with the launch of the new 'Golden Number'.

Brave participants were interviewed by community involvement manager and compere, Derek Fletcher, in front of an audience of tenants and employees, at a special event held at The Public in West Bromwich. A specially selected panel voted for two pre-recorded messages and one 'live' one over three rounds.

Winner Jayne who is media relations manager said: "I am extremely honoured to have been selected. Any one of my colleagues would have done an excellent job. I hope customers find my voice clear and easy to understand when they use the new service."

Contents

Times are tough – but help is at hand	page 4
'Clear rent account' winners rewarded	page 5
Top marks for community alarms service	page 5
How each £1 of your rent is spent	page 6
Feedback needed to improve services	page 6
Housing service panel dates for your diary	page 6
Carer's card features in Good Practice Guide	page 7
New Gas Safe registration scheme	page 7
Sandwell Homes gas services commended	page 7
Decent Homes Programme update	
Sandwell Homes spend £31.5 million on bringing kitchens into 21st century	page 8
Recognition for Decent Homes Partnership	page 9
Help us to improve our services	page 9
High-rise News	page 10
A day in the life of TLO Daryll Pritchett	page 10
£2.2 million boost for new CCTV scheme	page 11
Contents insurance is value for money	page 11
Praise for mediation service	page 12
Bloomin' lovely garden competition	page 12
Wanted – a tenant board member for Sandwell Homes	page 13
See something, say something	page 13
Leaseholder forum news	page 14
Housing options team on the move	page 14
Carry on fundraising, nurse!	page 15
Vote of thanks for retiring officers	page 15
Readers' survey	page 16



Cooking-up a storm at the Sandwell Community Show

Over 80,000 visitors are expected for this year's August Bank Holiday extravaganza in Sandwell Valley Country Park on Sunday 30 and Monday 31 from 11.00am – 5.00pm both days. Entrance is free.

Following on from last year's success, Sandwell Homes, with the support of the borough's Love Food Hate Waste campaign, will be hosting free live cookery demonstrations and tastings (12noon – 4.00pm), offering a diverse range of dishes from around the world.

There will also be the opportunity to take part in the special interactive game, 'Know Your Neighbour?' when we will be looking to test your knowledge about people in your community.

Equality officer for Sandwell Homes, Humaa Noori said: "Sandwell is proud to be home to a variety of cultures and communities. Sandwell Homes, Sandwell Council's community services, Sandwell Primary Care Trust and other agencies are working together to celebrate and raise people's awareness of those cultures and communities.

"A host of other free, fun and interactive activities will be on offer so come and join us and have some fun whatever your age."

- **Fancy yourself as a dancer?** Then come and try out the dance mats and show us how good you really are!
- **Fancy a new look?** Then come and get your hair braided or your eyebrows threaded.
- **Feeling stressed?** An Indian head massage could be just the answer to relax you.
- **Want a laugh and some fun?** Then Dippy the clown will entertain you.

All these activities will take place in and around the community marquee. There will also be the opportunity to

view the new Town Plan for the regeneration of West Bromwich town centre. Show goers can use a regular bus service from West Bromwich bus station – opposite the Metro line in the town centre – every 20 minutes on the Sunday and 10 minutes on the Monday, running from 10.00am – 6.40pm.

Town centre parking is free on Sunday but normal parking fees will apply on Monday. Showground parking will be available at Dartmouth Park at £4 per car, with a designated area for the disabled and wheelchairs provided by Shopmobility.



New surgery service available

Sandwell Homes is welcoming customers through the doors of new housing surgeries, which have been set up to provide a general housing management advice and assistance service.

The surgeries will help to point tenants and leaseholders in the right direction for housing advice following the closure of some neighbourhood offices in May.

Customers are advised that the surgeries will not provide cash taking facilities but will be able

to offer guidance and help with any housing related enquiries that they may have.

Adrian Scarrott, operations director for Sandwell Homes, said: "Following consultation with

customers and local councillors we decided it would be helpful to run these surgeries to ensure there's still a friendly face available on a weekly basis. Enabling access to our services remains a priority for Sandwell Homes."

Location details and opening times of the new surgeries are as follows:

Bristnall office: Beeches Road, Bristnall
Tuesdays, 9.00am – 1.00pm

Hateley Heath office: Monmouth Drive, West Bromwich
Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays 10.00am – 1.00pm

Tipton office: St Paul's Community Centre, Brick Kiln Street (off Owen Street) Tuesdays 10.00am – 12noon, and Thursdays 2.30pm – 4.00pm

Income Management Achievements 2008/09

Our income management team – who work hard with tenants who may have financial problems to offer them advice and assistance – have secured a number of major achievements during 2008/09.

- Although a slight drop in performance on the record of 98.08% in 2007/08 both cash collection and arrears control are holding up well in the worst economic downturn for decades.
- Evictions have practically halved in 2008/09 from 173 to 88.
- The number of possession hearings for rent arrears has reduced from 511 to 431.
- The rents casework team work personally with tenants to establish regular payment patterns. Over one third (136) of their cases were referred for ongoing support from other agencies to help them sustain their tenancies.
- A Citizens Advice Bureau debt worker carried out 437 interviews, identified £400,000 of potential additional benefits and agreed payment terms resulting in stopping 250 arrears actions.
- Acknowledged by the Audit Commission as having 'a strong approach to Financial Inclusion' and in particular partnership working.
- Agreed to expand financial inclusion work by funding a second debt worker through Sandwell CAB and by the appointment of a financial inclusion development worker.

Work in progress for 2009/10:

- In June, the income management team won the Chartered Institute of Housing, 'Housing Heroes awards' for its financial inclusion work.
- Financial inclusion strategy agreed by Sandwell Homes Board in July.
- The income management team has moved to our operations and development centre at Roway Lane, Oldbury to take advantage of customer services centre telephone technology. More tenants are choosing to contact us by telephone and this means we have the capacity and are able to monitor the service provided.

Times are tough – but help is at hand

We all know that times are tough at the moment with the deepest recession for decades and all the problems this brings with increased unemployment, short time working, lower wages and greater reliance on benefits.

It is more important than ever that tenants who have experienced a change in their circumstances or who are worried that they are having difficulty managing their budgets and finances seek help and advice.

Sandwell Homes has a comprehensive package of advice

available for tenants who are experiencing money worries and the vital message is to seek advice at an early stage and not put your tenancy at risk by running up rent arrears.

We also realise that difficulty in paying rent is only one sign of money worries, so whether its

rent or some other problem – help is at hand.

Sandwell Homes works closely with partners including Sandwell Citizen's Advice Bureau, Sandwell Council's welfare rights unit and Sandwell 6 Towns Credit Union to ensure the best advice is always available.

Housing benefit

Direct help with paying your rent may be available to those on lower wages and benefits. Don't assume this doesn't mean you. It's worth making an enquiry.

Call **0845 351 0020** for a claim form and advice/assistance or visit housing benefits staff at Sandwell Council House, Oldbury or revenues and benefits at Lodge Road, West Bromwich.

Maximise your income through benefits advice

Apart from housing benefit, many other benefits are available covering a wide range of circumstances. Millions of pounds worth of benefits go unclaimed every year.

To get advice and a benefits check call Sandwell Council's welfare rights unit advice line on **0121 569 3158** or call at any Sandwell Homes office to arrange an appointment.

Debt advice

The most important decision you can make is to decide you are not

copied financially, things won't get any better by ignoring reality. Next, you need independent advice to start out on the road to recovery. If you have rent arrears our employees can refer you to our dedicated debt workers employed by Sandwell Citizen's Advice Bureau.

Contact the rents team on **0121 569 2671/2700**. You can also access the service directly, whether you are in arrears or not, by calling Sandwell Citizen's Advice Bureau on **01384 564394** or visiting your nearest CAB office.

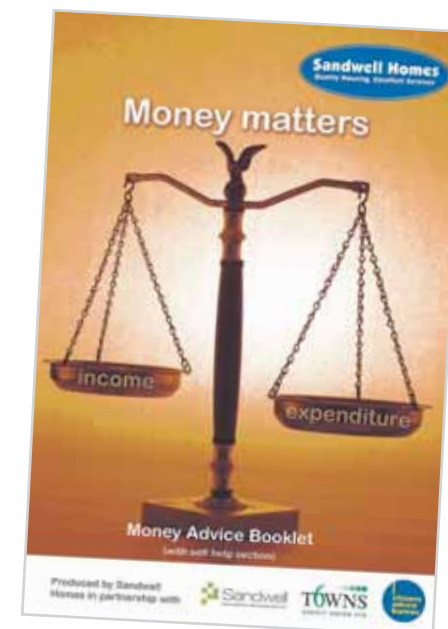
Affordable credit

We know that a lot of our tenants will borrow money from 'Doorstep Lenders', perfectly legitimate companies that may have been operating in the area for years.

Do you know however, that you may be paying incredibly high rates of interest on these loans? Even worse, some tenants, through desperation, may fall prey to illegal money lenders or 'Loan Sharks'. You can seek advice on affordable loans and

savings by contacting the 6 Towns Credit Union on **0121 553 3110** or by visiting 382 High Street, West Bromwich.

If you have any information regarding the activities of loan sharks in Sandwell report this in confidence on **0300 555 2222**.



Money matters advice booklet

Sandwell Homes has joined forces with the advice agencies mentioned above to produce a comprehensive advice booklet called 'Money matters'.

This booklet contains further information on these topics plus self-help guidance and other useful tips on managing your finances. Copies are available from the rents team, neighbourhood offices or our website www.sandwellhomes.org.uk

Tackling debt in Sandwell task group

Sandwell Council has set up this group to provide advice to those affected by financial problems and money worries. Further information on a wide range of issues can be obtained via their website www.tacklingdebtinsandwell.co.uk



Three members of the award-winning financial inclusion team.

REMEMBER HELP IS AT HAND BUT DON'T DELAY IN GETTING ADVICE. DELAY COULD PROVE EXPENSIVE AND PUT YOUR TENANCY AT RISK.



Income manager John Furness congratulates the winners.

'Clear rent account' winners rewarded

Lucky tenants have been rewarded for keeping their rent accounts up-to-date. Each year, Sandwell Homes runs its 'Clear Rent Account' prize draw.

All tenants with a clear rent account at the end of March were automatically entered. The prize fund, worth £1,000, was split into three individual prizes worth £500, £300 and £200 each.

Winners were offered a choice as to how they wanted to receive their winnings – which could count towards home contents insurance, setting up a Credit Union savings account or shopping vouchers.

Income manager John Furness said: "Once a year, Sandwell Homes says thank you to the vast majority of its tenants who pay their rent on time through the clear rent account prize draw. We have an excellent track record of collecting rent and controlling arrears. The prize draw helps to keep this going and recognise the contribution made by tenants towards this achievement."

The three winners - who all opted to receive shopping vouchers - were:
 1st prize – **Roy Biggs and Christine Key, West Bromwich**
 2nd prize – **Mandy Brookes, Rowley Regis**
 3rd prize – **Joan Darby, Wednesbury**

Top marks for community alarms service

The community alarms service has been presented with a special award for work on its Telecare service for the public.

Telecare is a service that enables people, especially the old and vulnerable, to live independently in their own home.

The service has been presented with the Part 3 Award by the Telecare Services Association (TSA), after an annual audit inspection took place in January.

The TSA developed the Telecare Code of Practice primarily for use by telecare service providers to ensure quality standards for service delivery, and, critically, to assist commissioners in identifying quality providers.

Member organisations seeking accreditation to the Code of Practice undergo a rigorous initial inspection, followed by annual inspections to ensure that compliance is retained.

On every third anniversary, member organisations are required to undergo a full inspection to ensure compliance. The community alarms service was audited against all three parts including Part 1 – Operational Service, Part 2 – Assessment and Installation and Part 3 – Mobile Response and was pleased to have passed all parts with no non-compliance.

Project development officer Louise Butler said: "We are proud to have received these awards. It recognises and confirms the quality service we provide for our clients."



Pictured with the awards are Gurjeet Samra, Renita Harapinski and Andrea Wright of the community alarms team.

Why not pay by Direct Debit?

Use Direct Debit to pay your rent and you'll have more time to do the things you want.



Flexible

Choose from three payment dates (5th, 15th & 28th) throughout the month. It reduces the possibility of forgetting to pay.

Easy to set up

Just provide your bank details and signature and we will do the rest.

Secure

The Direct Debit guarantee gives you peace of mind. It is the only payment method with a money-back guarantee.

Convenient

It saves time – no cheques to write. Spend less time waiting in queues.

Earlier this year, Sandwell Homes ran its 2009 Direct Debit prize draw. Any tenants signing up to pay their rent by Direct Debit by the end of March were automatically entered.

The winner Mrs Davinder Kaur, Oldbury was presented with £200 of shopping vouchers pictured with rent control and account manager Nigel Arthur.



Pick up a Direct Debit form from your nearest neighbourhood office or call us on **0121 569 5031**

WHY NOT PAY BY DIRECT DEBIT?

PAY YOUR HOUSING BILLS THE HASSLE-FREE WAY

Flexible • Easy to set up • Secure • Convenient
 Pick up a Direct Debit mandate from your local Neighbourhood Office or call us on 0121 569 5031

IT'S ONE LESS THING TO WORRY ABOUT

Direct Debit mandates received between 5th January 2009 and 31st March 2009 will be automatically entered with a chance to win **£200**.

The winner can choose how to receive their prize. It can be paid as a voucher, used to set up a savings account with the Credit Union or part of the winnings can be used towards our Home Contents Insurance Scheme, *the choice is yours...*



Feedback needed to improve services

Customer satisfaction surveys have been running now for approximately four years at Sandwell Homes.

The surveys help us to capture your views on a monthly, quarterly and six monthly basis and from your responses, we are continually trying to improve our services.

Surveys are carried out in the following service areas: repairs and maintenance, new tenancies, cleaning and care-taking services, improvement works (Decent Homes), security and concierge, tenancy support, gas services, gas breakdowns, warden services, electrical safety checks, customer care and access at neighbourhood offices, anti-social behaviour, aids and adaptations work and ground care.

If you receive a survey, we urge you to complete it and return it to us. All completed surveys will be entered into a £50 monthly prize draw.

Congratulations to the latest winners: -
Miss Jennifer Love, Tipton
Mr David Singh, West Bromwich
Mr Mark Kinsella, Oldbury
Mr Sucha Singh, Smethwick

Survey results are marked as an average out of 10. The most recent results for each service area are as follows:

Aids and adaptations	9.61
Gas servicing	8.93
Tenancy support service	8.82
Electrical safety checks	8.80
Warden services	8.73
Decent Homes programme	8.73
Gas breakdowns	7.94
Repairs and maintenance	7.71
Customer care	7.49
New tenancies	7.24
Ground care	7.17
Cleaning and care-taking service	7.05
Anti-social behaviour cases	6.58

If you would like more information on customer feedback surveys, please contact the business support team on **0121 569 6464**.

How each £1 of your rent is spent

The pie chart below shows how each £1 of your rent is spent.

51p the largest slice is with Sandwell Homes who undertake most of the day-to-day management and repairs to council homes.

21p is spent on borrowing costs (this relates to debt incurred in previous years, similar to mortgage costs).

17p is spent on major improvements such as new kitchens, bathrooms and central heating.

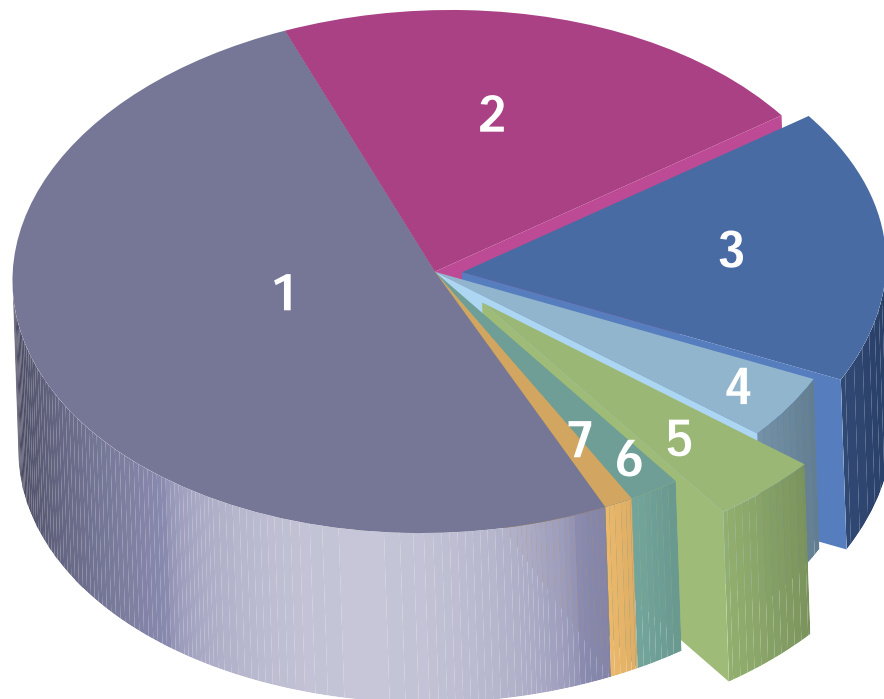
In total £18 million from rent payments is spent on improvements but another £50 million is provided by Government to make sure we achieve Decent Homes by 2012.

The remaining sums are small in comparison:

4p is spent on negative subsidy, this is where Government makes a calculation for each local authority area and depending on this calculation, the Government either takes money (known as negative subsidy) or provides a subsidy. In Sandwell a sum is paid over to the Government.

4p is spent on Housing Strategy, who ensure that Sandwell residents have a range of housing options which are well maintained and well managed.

The costs of the Private Finance Initiative or PFI (2p) and Tenant Management Organisations or TMO (1p) relate to areas where the services are provided by organisations other than Sandwell Homes.



For a typical £65 per week rent this is approximately:

Sandwell Homes (repairs and maintenance/housing management)	£33.40
Improvements	£11.32
Borrowing costs	£13.36
Negative subsidy	£2.66
Housing strategy	£2.41
PFI/TMO	£1.85
Total	£65.00

1	Sandwell Homes	51p
2	Borrowing Costs	21p
3	Improvements	17p
4	Negative Subsidy	4p
5	Housing Strategy	4p
6	PFI	2p
7	TMOs	1p

Housing service panel dates for your diary

Council tenants in Sandwell can pick up the latest housing news in their area by joining their local Housing Service Panel (HSP).

Organised by Sandwell Homes, each round of HSP meetings is held every three months with one for each of the borough's six towns. Panel members have the chance to

raise housing issues relating to their neighbourhoods and get an up-date on the work of Sandwell Homes.

Linda Paskin, HSP member for Tipton said: "The panels give tenants the opportunity to have a real say in how local housing services are delivered. We are especially interested in getting

views from younger and ethnic minority tenants."

If you are interested in attending your first Housing Service Panel meeting, please contact the governance unit on **0121 569 6062/5130**.

All venues have disabled access.

Town:	Venue:	Date:	Time:
Oldbury	Sandwell Homes operations and development centre, Roway Lane, Oldbury	Thursday 11 September	5.00pm
Rowley Regis	Salvation Army HQ, Meredith Street, Cradley Heath	Tuesday 8 September	10.00am
Smethwick	Venue to be confirmed	Wednesday 9 September	1.00pm
Tipton	Tipton Muslim community centre, Wellington Street, Tipton	Wednesday 16 September	7.00pm
Wednesbury	Venue to be confirmed	Tuesday 15 September	6.30pm
West Bromwich	Sandwell Homes operations and development centre, Roway Lane, Oldbury	Wednesday 9 September	6.00pm
Oldbury	Sandwell Homes operations and development centre, Roway Lane, Oldbury	Thursday 3 December	5.00pm
Rowley Regis	Salvation Army HQ, Meredith Street, Cradley Heath	Tuesday 1 December	10.00am
Smethwick	Sandwell Homes operations and development centre, Roway Lane, Oldbury	Wednesday 2 December	to be confirmed
Tipton	Tipton Muslim community centre, Wellington Street, Tipton	Wednesday 9 December	7.00pm
Wednesbury	Wodensborough community technical college, Hydes Road, Wednesbury	Tuesday 1 December	6.30pm
West Bromwich	Sandwell Homes operations and development centre, Roway Lane, Oldbury	Wednesday 2 December	6.00pm



Louise Butler with carer's card members Sylvia Archer, Janet Fox and Gurprit Sahota.

Carer's Card features in Good Practice Guide

The Carer's Emergency Card, our front-page story in the Spring edition of Homelife has notched up another success.

In addition to being a finalist in the most innovative project category at this year's National Federation of Arms Length Management Organisation's awards in April, the scheme has now been featured in a special best practice guide produced by the National Federation of ALMOs.

Called 'Good Practice Makes Perfect!', the Carer's Emergency Card is one of only 12 examples of good practice included in the publication which has been sent to

ALMOs up and down the country as well as to Government Ministers, MPs and public sector housing professionals.



The size of a credit card, the Carer's Emergency Card, is carried by carers participating in the scheme and clearly indicates they are a carer and someone depends on them. If the carer is involved in an accident

or emergency, the card alerts emergency services or other helpers that there may be a vulnerable person needing support.

The card carries a unique identification code and contact telephone number for a 24-hour response centre operated by Sandwell community alarms service. With an estimated 35,000 carers in Sandwell, the card ensures peace of mind.

Judge, Roy Irwin, chief inspector of housing at the Audit Commission said: "Simple and sensible."

To join the Carer's Emergency Card scheme or for more information contact **0121 500 5500**.



New Gas Safe registration scheme

The Gas Safe Register replaced the CORGI gas register in Great Britain and the Isle of Man on 1 April 2009.

The register exists to protect you, your family and your property from dangerous gas work.

By law, anyone carrying out work on gas installations and appliances in your home must be on the Gas Safety Register.

Only Gas Safe registered engineers employed by Sandwell Homes and its approved gas contractors will be sent to your home to undertake a gas safety inspection or repair.

Lookout for the YELLOW Gas Safe triangle on the engineer's Gas Safe ID card. It is important that Sandwell Homes tenants request to see this card as each engineer will carry a Gas Safe Register ID card with their own unique licence number, showing the type of gas work they are qualified to carry out.

Adrian Evans, gas services manager at Sandwell Homes adds that the new 'Gas Safe' logo and brand awareness will take a little time for our customers to get used to. "The key safety message though is clear. Before allowing anyone into your home to work on a gas inspection or repair, insist on seeing the engineer's ID card."

Sandwell Homes gas services commended

The gas services team at Sandwell Homes has been commended for their innovative work on increasing the number of inspections in homes in a national achievement awards scheme.

The annual Municipal Journal achievement awards recognise and promote the best service in local government.

This year, Sandwell Council's legal services team submitted the 'Gas Access' procedures of Sandwell Homes for the legal achievement category.

The judges awarded Sandwell Council a commendation for their innovation in co-developing a procedure with Sandwell Homes gas services in their approach to carrying out gas safety inspections. Sandwell Homes, working with the

council, co-developed a two-pronged legal procedure for dealing with tenants whose properties had proved difficult to gain access to, for the yearly gas safety inspection to be carried out. This involves taking cases to the County and Magistrates Courts.

Mohammed Taj, gas services administration manager, said: "By working as a team, Sandwell Council legal services and Sandwell Homes gas services have contributed towards excellent access performance results approaching 99.9%."



Debbie Silvester and Rachel Heeley of gas services with Neil Jones (centre) Sandwell Council legal services.



Further information on the new Gas Safe scheme can be found at www.gassaferegister.co.uk

DECENT HOMES PROGRAMME UPDATE

Sandwell Homes spend £31.5 million on bringing kitchens into 21st century

The Sandwell Decent Homes Partnership completed its 10,000th kitchen refurbishment in July as part of the £425m Decent Homes Programme being rolled out across the borough in partnership with Sandwell Homes.

The kitchens have been refurbished under the low-rise stream of Decent Homes work, and to date the company has spent £31.5m on kitchens alone since May 2005.

Meeting the 10,000th kitchen milestone is significant in demonstrating how social landlords such as Sandwell Homes are bridging the gap in standards of living and providing standard housing for those people living in council owned properties.

Photographs of kitchens circa 1900, taken at the Black Country Living Museum, show how times have changed with the advent of fitted kitchens and social housing projects such as the Decent Homes programme.

David Eveleigh, resident expert at the museum said: "Historically, working class kitchens served as work areas for cooking, washing clothes, and even the taking of baths (for miners and others in dirty trades) whilst also providing family space for everyday living.

"In the back-to-back house this kitchen was the one downstairs room used by all the family and thus frequently the scene of overcrowding.

"By contrast, those in higher social classes had kitchens separate from the family parts of the house and the work was done by servants. Kitchen work was labour intensive, with the range requiring lighting each morning and usually weekly cleaning of soot and polishing with black lead grate polish.

"Cooking took place over the fire, baking was done in a small oven with no thermostatic control, and hot water came from being boiled requiring very different domestic skills from those of today."

Kitchens at this time weren't fitted either – that concept only arrived in the late 1930s – so the room was dominated by a table and chairs. Lighting was either by gas or paraffin lamp where gas was not laid on.

Simon Parry, head of partnership management for Sandwell Homes said: "Today, with a busy urban lifestyle, customers require efficient work spaces.

"Recipients of the Decent Homes improvements have benefited with the removal of walls to enlarge small kitchens, partial or full plastering of walls and ceilings, a choice of kitchen doors, floor tiles, worktops and wall tiles as well as wallpapers or paints, and even lever taps for those unable to use a standard tap.

"Significantly, with the cost of domestic technology now at relatively affordable rates, today's kitchens require thought as to where white appliances such as cookers, dishwashers, washing machines, microwaves etc will be included. The Partnership goes that extra mile, tailoring kitchens to meet their customer's needs."

Lyndsey Elcock, from Albright Road, Smethwick, was lucky enough to be the 10,000th tenant to receive her kitchen upgrade. She said: "I love my new kitchen. The Sandwell Decent Homes Partnership has done a really professional job. The kitchen is now larger than it was before, it has been completely rewired, and also has new tiles, flooring and radiators."



Bessie Hawkes at the Black Country Living Museum in an old-style kitchen.



Tenant Lyndsey Elcock with Connaught's Kelly Birkett, Dave Greenhouse, Chris Howell and Sandwell Homes Simon Parry.

The Sandwell Decent Homes Partnership



RLB | Rider Levett Bucknall



Recognition for Decent Homes Partnership

The borough of Sandwell has received significant industry recognition this summer as the Sandwell Decent Homes Partnership (SDHP) has been hailed as one of UK's most innovative and forward thinking public and private partnerships.

Over the last three months, the construction partnership that undertakes all of the Decent Homes improvement works has won a number of industry awards.

These include awards from Business in the Community (BITC), the West Midlands Centre for Constructing Excellence (WMCCE) and trade magazine Contract Journal.

In June the Sandwell Decent Homes Partnership won a prestigious Business in the Community award for Power in Partnership.

The accolade is awarded to businesses able to demonstrate a significant impact on the community and high-quality management of their responsible business practices, as well as showing a positive impact both on society and on the business.

The BITC awards are the UK's most influential, independent, peer assessed corporate responsibility awards, and are seen by many as an opportunity for UK industry to

recognise those who are leading the way in responsible business.

Stephen Howard, chief executive, Business in the Community said: "Those who achieve the award are leading companies, ones that run their businesses aware that they depend above all on the talent, innovation and loyalty of their people."

"They know that they cannot build a successful, sustainable business without constantly showing their commitment to being a better business."

In addition to this, the Partnership has also won a highly coveted industry award for the second year running, picking up the WMCCE award for Integration and Collaboration back in March.

They beat off stiff competition to top the bill at an award ceremony, which celebrates best practice and partnering within the construction industry, and were also shortlisted



Steve Morgan, Wates; Simon Parry, John Clayton, Sandwell Homes; Chris Howell, Connaught and Stephen Howard, Business in the Community.

for the WMCCE Sustainability award.

The industry recognition helps to highlight the Partnership's commitment to going the extra mile and the way in which they look to add value to every part of their refurbishment work through the development of additional programmes outside of the traditional refurbishment work.

These include initiatives to tackle anti-social behaviour, improve estate

aesthetics and run down areas, educate the community on opportunities in the construction industry and ensure that local resources are prioritised by the Partnership.

But the success doesn't stop there. The Partnership has also been short-listed for two Contract Journal awards (a main construction industry publication) for Long Term Partnering and Training.

So, fingers crossed...

Help us to improve our services...

Customer feedback has always been important to Sandwell Homes in helping find out how your experience of receiving a service has been, whether we've done something well or whether there are areas of our service delivery that could be improved.

The Sandwell Decent Homes Partnership offers numerous opportunities for customers to get



in touch and comment on the work being carried out in their home or to their block. This can range from regular contact with customer liaison staff, newsletters with tear-off slips, a dedicated customer care-line, and more directly through customer satisfaction forms.

Customer satisfaction forms are given to those having had decent homes work completed on the low-rise programme.

On the high-rise programme customers are asked to complete satisfaction surveys at regular intervals because high-rise external work usually takes a year to be completed.

Every three months a winner is selected from each of the six towns from all of the returned low-rise surveys, and now a winner is also selected from each of the returned final surveys from completed high-rise blocks.

The forms are easy to complete with help filling them in also being made available. Please fill in satisfaction surveys when you receive them as they provide valuable feedback for us and could mean £25 in your pocket!

Gladys Jackson (pictured left), a tenant at Brookview said in her satisfaction survey recently: "I received only kindness and courtesy from all the workforce and can't fault them in anything."

Similarly, Doreen Jukes (pictured right) from Glebefields Road, Tipton praised the Partnership in her survey: "I cannot find words to say how very pleased I am at all the work that's been carried out here."

"All involved were excellent at the jobs carried out, hats off to the rewiring team, plumbers, plasterers and a very big 'thank you' to Steve who did all the decorating. I'm over the moon with the results."



for entry into our **£25** prize-draw



High-rise News

Mountford House, Horton and Farley Street

Work is now well under way on Mountford House in Kenrick Park, Smethwick, with an elegant external appearance slowly emerging from beneath the scaffolding.

At an estimated cost of £3 million, the project is expected to complete in September of this year. Mountford House is a seventeen storey, 42 year-old block, which was in need of a makeover.

The Decent Homes programme will bring it back to its former glory with improvements including new windows throughout, new cladding over balconies, repairs to concrete and brickwork, new front entrance and rear entrance modifications, a new roof covering, re-decoration of communal areas, three new flats, a new intercom system, and a new communal TV aerial.

There will also be landscaping works to include car parking, providing paved and seated areas as part of an estate-wide scheme.

Meanwhile, work to improve Horton and Farley Street high-rise blocks in Tipton is also well under way.

This project will see four eight-story blocks benefit from the replacement of broken glass panels to balconies, new entrance lobbies, repair to concrete and brickwork, a new roof covering, decoration of internal communal areas, new front doors, and new aluminium timber composite windows and balcony doors. At a cost of approximately £5 million this significant project is expected to complete in October.



Mountford House, Smethwick.

A day in the life of TLO Daryll Pritchett

A day in the life of Daryll Pritchett – the ‘people’s friend’ on the £8 million refurbishment of Lancaster House – starts every day with requests for help from tenants in the huge high-rise complex.



Tenant Barbara Smith with Daryll Pritchett.

When Daryll turns up at the Thomas Vale site offices there’s always a call for help – and recently Homelife spent some time with the tenant liaison officer to see her at work. It was soon obvious why Daryll won the National Tenant Liaison Officer of the Year award since she has a real rapport with the tenants and a close relationship with fellow employees on one of Europe’s largest housing schemes.

“I really love my job and enjoy trying to fix problems for tenants who are having their lives disrupted,” she said. “The problems raised are varied but we can usually sort something out.”

It was clear that Daryll is not afraid to roll up her sleeves as she moved furniture, covered items with sheets and explained the procedure for the replacement of windows.

Then she walked the block for the first time in a four-times-a-day routine to ensure there were no access problems before liaising with Ian Robbins, Sandwell Homes customer liaison officer.

During a lull in calls Daryll wrote part of a progress report for an action group meeting, before visiting six flats with a quality officer to inspect fire precaution work. A complaint on a faulty door was dealt with,

followed by talks with a sub-contractor about amendments to the window programme.

“I have just had a call from a tenant complaining about loud music, which can be a problem, and I will go out to investigate,” she said.

Discussions followed on cleaning issues with the concierge and caretaker before she started to write a fortnightly update report.

Soon she was again traipsing around the spaghetti-like network of passages to liaise with workmen on a ramp for wheelchair access.

The phone rings yet again. “It’s a call about Sky television reception – I’ll get the aerial engineers to sort it,” she said.

Action group member Dave Pagett called and spoke of his great relationship with Daryll. “We all get on well – The Lancaster House Action Group work closely with Thomas Vale to ensure that problems from such a huge contract are sorted quickly,” he said.

“The residents suffered horrendous noise when they drilled the roof, but it was quickly arranged to get those affected special headphones, which really helped.”

Soon it was up the stairs again with a carpenter to see tenant Elizabeth Sutherland who couldn’t fit her new curtain rail. “It is really very helpful to call on Daryll to sort our little problems like this,” she said.

We called to see Barbara Smith, a tenant for 18 years who is delighted she’s getting an improved flat, saying: “It is wonderful that Sandwell Homes is doing all this work.”

Mrs Smith, another action group member, respects Daryll’s work immensely. “She supports us and we support her,” she said.

Daryll is keen to praise Mrs Smith too remembering: “A few weeks ago the electricity went off in the block but left her with power and as we were here working until after midnight she brought us a cup of tea.”

As we left Daryll was walking the block and pathways again, checking out all the minor issues such as a report of a door not closing properly.

“Many of the requests for help are relatively small items but they are very important to the tenants,” she said. “I like to try and help them as efficiently and quickly as possible.”

It’s not hard to see why Daryll won a national award!

£2.2 million boost for new CCTV scheme

Sandwell Homes is investing £2.2million in a new state-of-the-art CCTV system and control centre to ensure the continued safety and security of residents and tenants across the borough.



An artist's impression of the new control centre.

The 'Invest to Save' scheme will see existing CCTV and concierge systems upgraded to the latest industry standard resulting in improved service quality, and improved maintenance resulting in a more effective service.

Reduced running costs, over the next five years mean the project will pay for itself over that time.

Seven existing monitoring sites will relocate to a single control centre operating from Sandwell Homes operations and development centre at Roway Lane, Oldbury.

Adrian Scarrott, director of housing services for Sandwell Homes said: "We know that the CCTV and concierge service is highly regarded by tenants and residents and is integral to tackling anti-social behaviour and crime on Sandwell estates.

"By investing £2.2 million in the new scheme we will improve the quality and efficiency of the service we can provide. We will continue to meet the needs of local residents and take on a more focused role working to reduce the fear of crime and disorder on our estates.

"The current system is operating to full capacity and there is no ability to expand existing coverage to other high and low-rise blocks.

"The new system will let us do this, reaching out to more people. The service strives to provide a good source of evidence for police,

housing and other enforcement agencies. This will be enhanced even more with the new system."

Work on the new control centre is set to start in September 2009 and is expected to be completed in early 2010 with the new control centre up and running in Spring 2010.

Partnership working

The new system will strengthen the work with our partners – Sandwell Council, West Midlands Police and the Safer Sandwell Partnership.

We will continue to work closely with wardens, anti-social behaviour teams, Police, neighbourhood offices and tenants and residents.

Benefits will include:

- The quality of the CCTV images will be standardised.
- New protocols will be developed to share intelligence between the Police and Sandwell Homes CCTV monitoring staff.
- Partners will be able to feedback to Sandwell Homes in a more co-ordinated way as to the usefulness of the CCTV images.

Did you know, we provide CCTV in the following areas/sites:

Existing CCTV schemes cover the following areas:
Riddins Mound estate, Charlemont Farm, Birchcroft, Ashcroft and Elmcroft House, Darley House and surrounding area, Kendrick Park estate, Lion Farm Estate, Lancaster House, Bolton Court, Nelson House, Wednesbury Town Centre, Parts of Yew Tree Estate, Friar Park, Alfred Gunn House, Broadmeade House, West Bromwich Town Centre, St Giles and Moorlands Court, Meadow Avenue and Princes End Shopping Centre.

Currently operating:
Intercom services, access control plus CCTV to 32 high-rise blocks plus surrounding low-rises. We monitor over 470 cameras covering 3,500 properties as well as several town centre schemes.

Contents insurance is value for money

More than 90 per cent of people who answered a customer satisfaction survey on our tenants' contents insurance scheme thought that it was good value for money.

Out of the 828 survey replies an overwhelming 98.9 per cent said they thought the scheme was good value for money.

Contents insurance officer Mark Stokes said: "There is a pleasing level of satisfaction among customers and it is clear that the fact that we offer a low cost insurance scheme with highly flexible payment methods/schedules is appreciated."

Mark said that there was a slight area of concern highlighted in that many customers did not appear to have a good understanding of everything the insurance covers.

There were some common misconceptions, for example

many people were not aware that shed contents are covered or that accidental damage cover is available.

The great majority of tenants - 84.39 per cent - rated the range of cover under the scheme as being good or excellent.

Tenants also responded positively to questions about the day-to-day running of the scheme conducted by the contents insurance section. They recorded a score of 92 per cent on 'excellent or good' work by officers and only 0.58 per cent recorded a score of poor.

And 85 per cent of customers recorded excellent or good scores about the service they received

from staff at local neighbourhood offices relating to the scheme.

Mark said there did not appear to be a great demand for widening cover, either in terms of changing the policy in a way that increases costs or in terms of 'optional extras'.

"Our current approach of reviewing the policy on an annual basis and increasing cover and limits without increasing premiums as and when claims experience allows appears to be the best approach.

"Of the ideas put forward, a degree of cover for items away from the home would be an excellent addition to our range of cover and is something we will bring to the attention of the insurers."

For more details about the scheme contact the contents insurance section on **0121 569 5024**.

Praise for mediation service

Tenants who have used Sandwell Homes mediation service to solve disputes have voted the scheme an overwhelming success.

Mediation First, the independent service provider, received 67 referrals during 2008/09.

Only two cases did not result in an agreement by the parties concerned resulting in a 97 per cent success rate.

Mediation services are for neighbours who have fallen out with each other. The mediators help find a lasting solution acceptable to everyone.

This is an increase in referrals since 2007/08 of 60 per cent. Where mediation has resulted in agreement, anti-social behaviour has ceased and the case is closed.

Tenants who used the service completed user questionnaires. All of them confirmed they felt the process was fully explained, that the mediator was competent, contact was maintained throughout the process and the standard of the service received was extremely professional.

Positive comments included:

- "Well done! Service and professionalism was excellent"
- "Very good indeed I liked the service very much"
- "Since the agreement date there has been a marked improvement and noise generated has decreased"
- "Excellent service!"
- "The Mediation First team was very good, better than I could have hoped for. They sorted out our problems and were very helpful"
- "I found the mediator professional, impartial, efficient, very pleasant and approachable"
- "Since we received mediation our neighbour has been friendly and polite. As a family it has helped us to get on as neighbours"

If you are interested in mediation or require further information contact your nearest neighbourhood office. Mediation First is an independent and impartial service which is available free of charge to all Sandwell Homes tenants. Contact them on **0121 550 1667**.



Best Garden: Pam Smith, Abbey Crescent, Oldbury



Best Bungalow Garden: Jean Horton, Brookfield Road, Oldbury

Bloomin' lovely garden competition

Pam Smith, the wonderful plantswoman who has created a haven of peace and tranquility on her Oldbury estate, has won the 2009 Sandwell Homes Gardens competition.

She won with a stunning display of trees, shrubs and perennial plants – despite the dreadful rainy conditions in the two weeks' run-up to the judging.

Pam, a former winner, beat last year's winners Roy and Irene Edwards of Friar Park Road, Wednesbury in a

tightly-run competition. The judges were particularly impressed with the design and the creatively-carved borders and the huge range of plants in the borders at Pam's garden.

Keith Blackwell, communications and marketing manager at Sandwell Homes, said he and his fellow judges were "very, very impressed" with the standard of gardening skills in Pam's colourful creation.

"Pam has a marvellous collection of plants and has weaved them into the borders in a very skilful way," he said. "It is a credit to her that she has made such a great garden despite the dreadful weather."

The judges were also impressed with the efforts of the other prize-winners, including Ira Grey who won the Best Communal Garden at

Pitfields Close, Oldbury with another stunning display.

The class for the Best Garden for Flatted Accommodation was won by James Martin of Lower High Street, Wednesbury and the winner of the Bungalow Garden was carried off by Jean Horton at Brookfield Road, Oldbury.

Brian Oakley, chief executive of Sandwell Homes, said he had visited the winning garden and had been highly-impressed with the incredibly high standard of the gardening.

"Pam's garden was a real jewel – and demonstrates how much effort she must have put in to create a wonderful space."

Pam said she was delighted to receive the award from chief executive Brian Oakley.

RESULTS:

Best Garden:
1st Pam Smith, Abbey Crescent, Oldbury
2nd Mr and Mrs Ray Edwards, Friar Park Road, Wednesbury

Best Garden for Flatted Accommodation:
1st James Martin, Lower High Street, Wednesbury
2nd Julie Whitehall and Julie Reeves, Kent Road, Wednesbury

Best Communal Garden:
1st Ira Grey, Pitfields Close, Oldbury
2nd Judy Potter, Chillington Road, Tipton

Best Bungalow Garden:
1st Jean Horton, Brookfield Road, Oldbury
2nd Leonard Sandland, Wickham Square, West Bromwich

Best Balcony and Baskets:
1st Steve Hill, Meadow Avenue, West Bromwich
2nd Barry Hitchins, Laing House, Martley Road, Oldbury



Best Balcony and Baskets: Steve Hill, Meadow Avenue, West Bromwich



Best Communal Garden: Ira Grey, Pitfields Close, Oldbury

Pam's Gardening Tips

- 1 Wet newspaper is a good substitute for compost when planting roses, sweetpeas and dahlias
- 2 Bury an empty margarine tub in the ground with the top level with the soil. Fill with beer and slugs will crawl in and drown
- 3 Save ice lolly sticks to make garden labels
- 4 To encourage bush plants pinch out the top of young plants
- 5 In very hot weather when watering your sweetpeas or runner beans spray foliage and flowers
- 6 Crushed egg shells under seeds when planting sweetpeas will feed the plants with potash
- 7 Before gardening, if you don't like wearing gloves, press your nails into a bar of soap, this will stop the soil going into your nails
- 8 Plant flowers that remind you of your childhood, they will give your spirits a lift when you walk around the garden



"I love my garden and I am pleased that Sandwell Homes run a competition to encourage us to do our gardens nicely."

Pam Smith, competition winner



Best Garden for Flatted Accommodation: James Martin, Lower High Street, Wednesbury

WANTED - a tenant board member for Sandwell Homes

We are seeking applications from any tenants or leaseholders who live in Rowley Regis, Oldbury or Smethwick to join the board of Sandwell Homes.



Sandwell Homes is responsible for managing, maintaining and improving Sandwell Council's properties.

We are looking for a tenant or leaseholder to be part of our committed team of board members who are striving to make a difference to housing services, our neighbourhoods and enhance the lives of our customers. Our board members are unpaid, though expenses, including childcare, are reimbursed.

Want to find out more?

For more details or an information pack and application form, please contact the governance team on **0121 569 5130** or **6062** or email governance_unit@sandwellhomes.org.uk or write to:-
Sandwell Homes Ltd, Governance Unit, Dartmouth House, Sandwell Road, West Bromwich B70 8TQ

We would be pleased to receive applications from women, people from black and minority ethnic groups and people with disabilities as they are under-represented on the board. The closing date for applications is Friday 18 September 2009.

See something Say something

safertravel.info or text **07624 818332**

SAFER TRAVEL

With crime reducing by 33 per cent last year and a further 14 per cent this year, it is getting even safer to travel on the bus network.

is able to react quickly to concerns. To report nuisance and anti-social behaviour, See Something, Say Something, text **07624 818332** or report via www.safertravel.info

The Safer Travel Partnership is working hard to reduce nuisance and anti-social behaviour. Listening to issues that are experienced by the public, the Safer Travel Partnership

For general public transport issues, please contact Centro customer services on **0121 214 7214** or email customerrelations@centro.org.uk

Reporting anti-social behaviour

People are urged to report problems in their area to the anti-social behaviour helpline on **0845 359 7500**



The non-emergency line is operated: 8.00am-8.00pm Monday-Friday and 8.30am-1.30pm Saturday

People should still ring **999** in emergencies.

Leaseholder forum news

At the forum held on the evening of 8 July at Sandwell Council House, Oldbury, there was a record attendance of 62 leaseholders.

The agenda included items on: digital aerials, feedback from the repairs group, an update on the billing process following implementation of a new computer system, and leaseholder newsletter.

Representatives from the investment division attended to give information on the replacement of the analogue communal aerials with new digital aerials. There was a high level of interest in this topic and lots of leaseholder comments have been taken back and are currently being considered by Sandwell Homes.

Following the work of the repairs group made up of leaseholder representatives and Sandwell Homes officers, the forum was given information in relation to additional repair and maintenance items that may be offered to leaseholders and also information on a proposed gas servicing scheme for leaseholders. Two draft leaflets were shown and some useful feedback was received.

Leaseholders were informed that there will be some changes in the way the new Sandwell Homes housing management system will deal with repairs with regard to the five year reconciliation period and with individual dwelling repairs. There was some discussion on these improvements and further details will be given as they become available.

There was some discussion about the volume of information that can be included in items at the forum and within the limited space available in this Homelife publication. It was agreed that, with so much to inform about, a simple newsletter for leaseholders will be prepared.

The forum ended as usual with an opportunity for leaseholders to discuss individual enquiries on a one-to-one basis.

The next forum meeting will be in October (date to be confirmed). For more information contact the home ownership unit on **0121 569 5199**.

Housing options team on the move

Sandwell residents and tenants can now access a trained team of specialist housing advisors from their new headquarters in central West Bromwich.

The housing options team, which offers a wide range of housing advice and support has relocated to one new housing options centre, at Court House, High Street, West Bromwich from their two previous locations in Oldbury and Tipton.

Visitors to the centre have access to private interviewing facilities and an on-site money advisor if needed.

What is the housing options service?

It provides advice and assistance, free of charge, to help people in Sandwell find a new home or to keep their current home.

The housing options team can be accessed by phone, fax or email. They book appointments for face-to-face interviews although will see you without an appointment if it is an emergency.

Some common reasons why people contact the housing options service:

- Your private landlord may be ending your tenancy
- You may be going through a relationship breakdown or experiencing domestic abuse
- You may have rent arrears or be facing eviction
- You may have mortgage arrears and be facing repossession

What can we do?

- Provide advice about housing options to Sandwell residents
- Prevent homelessness
- Advise and assist when people find themselves homeless
- Provide emergency temporary accommodation for people who are homeless and in priority need
- Provide an out-of-hours emergency housing advice service

Housing options interviews are usually conducted over the telephone. Information is gathered in stages to enable you to receive the best advice at the right time.

Service improvement co-ordinator for the housing options service Beverly Jones said: "In the current climate of

housing shortage and economic downturn, the housing options team is working doubly hard to help people find their way through the housing market.

"If people are experiencing difficulties related to their housing need, it is much better if they come and see us earlier rather than later."

The team has also launched a comprehensive series of information booklets which explain the advice and support available if you are looking for accommodation, threatened with homelessness or find yourself homeless.

The easy-to-read colour themed booklets focus on three subject areas: **Finding Accommodation**, **Preventing Homelessness** and **Homelessness**. The individual booklets are listed below:

Series One – Finding Accommodation

- 1: Council accommodation

- 2: Housing association accommodation
- 3: Private landlord tenancies
- 4: Shared ownership
- 5: Supported accommodation for young people

Series Two – Preventing Homelessness

- 1: Housing options interview
- 2: Family mediation
- 3: Deposit guarantee scheme
- 4: Sanctuary scheme
- 5: Discretionary housing payments
- 6: Harassment and illegal eviction
- 7: Mortgage basic court process
- 8: Homeowners – sale to rent back
- 9: Mortgage rescue scheme

Series Three – Homelessness

- 1: Rent arrears
- 2: Parents no longer willing to accommodate
- 3: Domestic abuse
- 4: Private tenancies ending
- 5: Mortgage arrears
- 6: Homeless? what next?

These are available from the housing options team – see details opposite.



Beverly Jones, Sue Parry and Lorraine Eardley with the new housing options booklets.

HOMESWAPPER

The way forward for mutual exchanges



HomeSwapper is the largest and most successful home swap service in the UK. More than 430 social landlords throughout the country are signed up to HomeSwapper which has over 85,000 members who are actively looking to swap homes.

Sandwell Homes has joined forces with HomeSwapper to provide a FREE service for you.

So far, more than 1,500 Sandwell Homes tenants have taken advantage of this opportunity and signed up for a move.

HomeSwapper is flexible, you can look to swap homes with another Sandwell Homes tenant or tenants of other Registered Social Landlords such as a housing association.

You may consider a two-way, three-way or more swap. It could be a swap that is down the street or across the country – the choice is yours.

Registering for a swap is easy:

- Simply register online at www.homeswapper.co.uk or
- Complete an application form at any neighbourhood office or property shop

Once you are an approved member you will receive your matches on a regular basis via email or text.

A HomeSwapper brochure detailing all potential swaps is produced monthly and available in all our neighbourhood offices or property shops.

For more information visit www.homeswapper.co.uk or your nearest neighbourhood office or property shop.

Please note you cannot exchange properties without your landlord's permission.

Update on new Allocations Policy

Due to changes in legislation and the need for more flexibility within the system, the Council has reviewed its current allocations policy.

The new housing allocations policy was agreed by the Council and has been in effect since May 2009. The main changes included in the policy relate to the introduction of seven new priority bands with Band One being the most urgent through to Band Seven being the least urgent.

All current Choice Based Lettings members (as of 13 May 2009) have been sent a letter advising them of the band in which their application has been placed.

We have reached this decision based on the information we hold regarding your circumstances at that date.

If you feel the band in which your application has been placed does not reflect your current circumstances, you should contact your neighbourhood office as soon as possible to discuss this.

Two information booklets explaining the new policy and Choice Based Lettings are available from your nearest neighbourhood office or property shop.

You can also contact them if you have any questions about the changes.

The housing options team can be contacted on:

0121 569 2666 or **0121 569 2679** or **0121 569 5285**

The emergency out-of-hours number is:

0121 525 4688

Email enquiries:

housing_options@sandwellhomes.org.uk

or via the Sandwell Homes website:

www.sandwellhomes.org.uk



Carry on fundraising, nurse!

Members of Tanhouse community centre, Sandwell Homes employees, partners and tenants worked together to raise more than £1,400 to help improve the care and comfort for new mums and babies at the local hospital.

A cheque for £1,430 was presented to staff at the Neo-Natal unit at Sandwell District Hospital by representatives of Sandwell Homes, partners and tenants.

Tenant representative Dot Gospel said: "The members of the Tanhouse Community Centre worked hard to raise the money through shows, raffles and donations from all the users of the centre including tenants from Scott House, who also helped by giving to the raffles.

"The money will be used to help staff enhance care and comfort for new mums and babies by providing those extra touches. The babies are often in hospital for some time and not able to start life in the comfort of a home, so any extra

touches the unit can make are really important."

Sandwell Homes finance director, Paul Field started the fundraising rolling with his 'nurse dress-up day' and was at the presentation with Tony Ford from Taylor Woodrow, Sylvie Fielden-Nicholls from Connaught and Sylvia Brown and Dot Gospel from the Tanhouse Community Centre.

Two of Sandwell Homes construction partners, Connaught and Taylor Woodrow, kindly donated money as well as cash raised by Sandwell Homes employees collected by Paul Field during his hilarious day dressed as a nurse. Members of the Tanhouse community centre raised a further £530 by holding entertainment and raffle shows.

Paul said: "It's very heartening that so many people supported our charity effort and it was very satisfying to go to the hospital to present the cheque to the nursing staff who will make good use of the money we've raised."

Vote of thanks for retiring officers

Homelife editorial panel member Reg Hackett has praised three Sandwell Homes senior managers for their years of loyal and dedicated service.

Bob Livingstone, Tom Naughton and Liz Spencer have recently retired from Sandwell Homes after clocking up nearly 70 years of service between them.

Bob Livingstone held several area manager posts and was more recently involved in implementing the company's new housing management computer system.

Tom Naughton was area manager for West Bromwich and Smethwick. Liz Spencer was area manager for Wednesbury and

more recently facilities manager.

Reg said: "I am sure that all those of us who have worked with Bob, Tom and Liz over the years to improve housing services would like to wish them well for their retirement."

Sandwell Homes now has two area managers: Manjit Rai for the north of the borough (Tipton, Wednesbury and West Bromwich) and Michelle Fletcher for the south of the borough (Oldbury, Rowley Regis and Smethwick).

Readers' survey: tell us your opinions

Give us your opinions on Homelife and be in with a chance to win £50, £25 or £15.



1. What do you think of Homelife?

- Very Good Good
 Fair Poor
 Very Poor

General items, if yes, please state what

2. What do you like about Homelife?

Please list below:

3. What do you dislike about Homelife? Please list below:

4. Is there any information or an item that you would like to see in Homelife that doesn't normally appear?

Please list below:

5. Are there any features/items in Homelife you don't find useful?

Please list below:

6. Are there any features/items you would like to see changed?

Please list below:

7. Would you like to see more articles about your local area or do you prefer more general items about Sandwell Homes and its services?

Local area, if yes, please state what

8. We want to find out what you think of the way Homelife looks. Are its looks and design

- Very Good Good
 Fair Poor
 Very Poor

9. Which of the following descriptions do you think suits Homelife?

- Looks bright and cheerful?
 Is well-laid out and easy to read?
 Looks dull and boring?
 Is difficult to read?

10. Do you have any other comments about the way Homelife looks?

11. Homelife is currently produced three times a year. Would you prefer it to appear...

- More often, if yes, how often
 Less often, if yes, how often
 Other period (please state)

12. We want to find out where readers get their information about Sandwell Homes

Please tick the single most important source of information for you:

- Newspapers
 Homelife
 Other information provided by Sandwell Homes (leaflets, posters, letters)
 Direct contact with Sandwell Homes (visiting or telephone)
 Friend/word of mouth
 Sandwell Homes website
 Other (please state)

13. What is the second most important source of information for you?

Please state from the list in Q12

14. Where would you prefer to get your information about Sandwell Homes?

Please tick your preferred source:

- Newspaper
 Homelife
 Other information provided by Sandwell Homes (leaflets, posters, letters)
 Direct contact with Sandwell Homes (visiting or telephone)
 Friend/word of mouth
 Sandwell Homes website
 Text messages
 Social media sites (such as Twitter and Facebook)
 Interactive digital TV
 Other (please state)

15. What is your second preferred source?

Please state from the list in Q14

16. We are considering setting-up a readers' panel for tenants and leaseholders. This would involve reading, reviewing and giving your opinions on our information and publicity materials. Would you be interested in taking part?

- Yes No

Demographic information:

Are you male or female?

- Male Female

How old are you?

- under 25 25-34
 35-44 45-54
 55-64 65+

To which of these groups do you consider you belong to?

- White British Irish
 Any other white background (please state)

Mixed:

- White and Black Caribbean
 White and Black Asian
 White and Asian
 Any other mixed background (please state)

Asian or Asian British:

- Indian Pakistani
 Bangladeshi Chinese
 Any other Asian background (please state)

Black or Black British:

- Caribbean African
 Any other Black background (please state)

Other (please state)

Please return your questionnaire by Saturday 19 September 2009.

Name: _____

Address: _____

Postcode: _____

Telephone: _____

Please note your details will not be passed on to any other parties.

Please return this questionnaire to:

Homelife Readers' Survey, **Freepost Plus RLUK-GKTZ-JSXG**
 Sandwell Homes, Business Development, Dartmouth House
 Sandwell Road, West Bromwich B70 8TQ