

Streets Ahead

Proposed Rent and Benefit Changes

It is possible you may have read in the national press that the government have put forward a number of proposals which are likely to impact on tenants and future tenants. We did mention some of these in the previous edition of 'Streets Ahead'.

First of all is the proposal to have one 'universal credit' payment rather than having to claim a number of different allowances. In principle this sounds like a good idea, but part of the proposal is that direct payments of rent to landlords will stop. For most this will pose few problems, but for the few who may have problems managing their finances the concern is they will fall into arrears and be at risk of losing their homes.

Another proposal is that future tenancies will no longer be for life. This will not affect existing tenants, but in future it is possible that new tenancies may be for a fixed period. The logic being that should a tenant's situation improve, and they no longer need a council house, they will be encouraged to move on to alternative tenures and free up their home for somebody who has a greater need for it.

As we have mentioned before, the Council allocates its empty homes through a choice based lettings partnership with Spelthorne and Elmbridge Councils called SEARCH Moves. To date, we have been encouraged to operate 'open' lists which enables anyone to register, but with 3000+ names on the register and approx 200 homes becoming available each year, it is clear the majority of people on the register have little prospect of being helped. The government proposals may have a number of implications for the SEARCH Moves partnership, and it is possible that we may have to make some changes to the way we allocate our homes. We will keep residents and applicants informed of any proposed changes.

A further proposed change is likely to affect a number of our residents. Until now, the limit on benefit payable to residents living in homes bigger than they need has only applied to private sector tenants, but from 2013 it is being proposed that working age tenants living in council properties with spare bedrooms will no longer get all their rent paid by benefit. The logic behind this is to encourage tenants to move to smaller homes to free up family sized properties for those on the register. This will only apply to working age tenants, not the elderly, but if you feel this might affect you and you would like further information about how to move to a smaller home ahead of the change, then please contact Jane Margetts on 01932 425824.

Council acts on antisocial behaviour

The Council will pursue people who behave antisocially and over the past 12 months has had a number of successful cases against perpetrators.

In March 2011 Staines County Court granted a Demotion Order (this reduces a tenants level of security in his or her home) against a resident in a block of flats. The resident was found guilty of antisocial behaviour including incidents of loud screaming, banging, arguing and shouting with members of their household on a regular basis. A neighbour provided a witness statement and came to court to give evidence.

Since the Demotion Order was granted further incidents have occurred so now, the Council is applying for a Possession Order.

In August 2011 Guildford County Court granted a Suspended Possession Order against a resident who was guilty of indecent exposure. The tenant was also found guilty of acts of domestic violence against their ex partner which had taken place in the property. A neighbour came forward to provide the information necessary to obtain the order and provided a witness statement at court.

These are just two examples of the results achieved. In addition, since October 2010 the Council has obtained:-

- 12 injunction orders (all with a power of arrest attached)
- One Suspended Possession Order
- Two Demotion Orders
- Two applications for Possession Orders are currently being processed.

Call 010932 425821 to report antisocial behaviour.

THE DIGITAL TV SWITCHOVER AND YOU!



DON'T FORGET..... TV in the UK is going digital, and the existing analogue TV signal transmitter will be switched off in April of 2012.

Switchover means that almost everyone will be able to receive digital TV through their aerial, but to watch the programs on your television you will need to convert your TV to receive digital before the switchover date.

The switchover dates for the London area are the 4 and 18 April. On 4 April you will no longer be able to watch BBC2 without a digital receiver and from 18 April, all the channels will be switched to digital format. If you have not converted by 18 April 2012 you will not be able to watch any TV.

To manage these changes, the government has created an independent body called Digital UK to provide help and support. If you have a general query you can ring free on 0800 40 85 900, phone lines are open 8am-8pm Monday to Friday and 8am-6pm Saturday and Sunday, or go onto the web pages www.digitaluk.co.uk where a lot of information can be found. If you need to, you can contact them using Textphone on 0800 40 85 936. We would remind you that free phone numbers are not always available from mobiles and may be charged at different rates depending on your network provider.



Reception:

1. Through an aerial (Freeview):

You can convert your existing analogue televisions by connecting each TV to a digital box. You will need to convert all TVs in your home. You don't have to get a new TV but if you do, get an integrated digital TV (IDTV). Look for the 'digital tick' logo. It appears on products that are designed to continue working after switchover.

If you live in a medium or high rise flat, it is likely that you are connected to a communal TV aerial system (one set of aerials or satellite dish serving multiple TV connection points.) and the Council has already made plans by upgrading the aerial systems. For those of you in flats, we will be writing to you shortly to explain whether you need to consider getting your own aerials or not.

2. Through a satellite

Through a satellite dish (Sky). You can choose from a monthly subscription service (Sky digital) or a one-off fee for the equipment (freesat, Freesat from Sky).

3. Through cable or phone line.

In many regions you will be able to access digital TV through a cable or phone line such as Virgin Media or BT Vision.

If you live in a council house, you should be able to install any of these, if they are available after seeking our permission. However, if you live in a flat you will need to check with us about what services are available through the communal TV system, if you don't already know.

Between now and April 2012, when the London area transmitter group is switched over, we will send you a number of letters and articles about how you need to get ready.

A message from Runnymede's recycling team...

Christmas and New Year rubbish and recycling.

You should have had a recycling and refuse collection calendar delivered recently which details all your collection days for the forthcoming year.

Also on this calendar are the dates for this Christmas and New Year period. Please ensure you are aware of your collection day as it may change over this period.

If you have not received this calendar or have any questions you would like to talk to us about please contact us free on 0800 052 0067.

You can also find details on our website www.runnymede.gov.uk or e-mail us on recycling@runnymede.gov.uk

Christmas trees

Once again this year the Weybridge Garden Centre, New Haw Road, Addlestone, KT15 2BU, is providing a collection point for residents' real Christmas trees. Just remove all the decorations and take them to the area set aside in the car park for the trees, between 3 January and 3 February 2012, and we will make sure they are recycled.

Thank you

We'd like to say a big thank you to everyone as, with your help we have almost doubled our recycling rates this year.

You may not believe this but, in the first quarter of this year alone, we collected just over 660 tonnes of food waste to be composted into soil enhancer rather than being sent to landfill.





RCRA

Runnymede Council Residents' Association



Picture above: Jenny Hill

DO YOU HAVE A STORY TO TELL?

If so we would like to hear from you. This is an opportunity for you to become more involved in the content of your newsletter. For instance, you may know of someone who has been involved in helping others in the community where you live and you feel has contributed to making your neighbourhood a better place to live.

You may also like to send in your favourite recipe that you would like to share with other residents. If this proves popular we may make it a regular feature.

As mentioned in the Annual Report we would like photographs of anything of interest in Runnymede which can then be used for the next edition of Streets Ahead, or possibly for a future calendar.

If you would like to help or to become more involved in any way, please contact either Jane Margetts on 01932 425824 or Jenny Hill on 01932 568405 or email jennihill@ntlworld.com

Jenny Hill

ASSOCIATION OF RETAINED COUNCIL HOUSING (ARCH)



ARCH Tenants Group held their annual conference at Milton Keynes recently.

It was considered a successful conference in that it was arranged by the ARCH Tenants Group - albeit with the help of a facilitator.

The group decided on the speakers for the morning session and what workshops it wanted in the afternoon session. Each of the workshops had an ARCH committee member as chairman of that workshop and to the right is a picture of the workshop chaired by me in which we went into detail as to who self financing will work for.

As I have now been elected as vice chairman of the ARCH Tenants Group I am entitled to attend the ARCH Executive meetings and will use these pages in Streets Ahead to feed back to you any relevant information.

Jenny Hill



Picture above: Graham Martin Workshop

DO YOU LIVE IN RUNNYMEDE BOROUGH HOUSING?



Picture above: Teresa Stone

**Are you 60 years old or a little older and retired?
Are you active but still live an independent life?
Are you perhaps thinking of downsizing your home to something smaller?
If so, have you considered moving into Sheltered Housing?**

Runnymede Borough has five such schemes. You would have your own flat and be helped with the tenancy set up. You would continue to live an independent life but be safer and more secure. There is advice and help at hand where and when you need it. You would be encouraged to join in and share in the leisure and social activities and even put forward your own ideas.

I moved into Sheltered Housing in my early 60's and have settled into a happy life where I have made new friends and enjoy all the advantages put before me. I look forward to the many years ahead because I know that my future is bright.

Surrey Wide Involvement Group (SWIG)

SWIG recently held their AGM where the new officers were elected for the next year. I am pleased to say that for the first time I (as a Tenant) was elected chairman of the group. The Group hold Forums on a quarterly basis and the committee encourage other tenants to attend so that ideas and best practice can be discussed.

Guest speakers are also invited to present topics that may interest or concern tenants or have some bearing on the way in which their homes are managed.

Jenny Hill

Contents insurance

It is always important but especially at this time of year, to make sure you have your own contents insurance. The recent fire at Painesfield Drive in Chertsey is a good example of what can happen when disaster strikes. There were quite a few tenants who lost everything and had no contents insurance cover to be able to replace the damaged items.

The bricks and mortar are insured by the Council but the responsibility for the contents remains with the tenant.

There are lots of companies who will provide you with a quote so try the internet or yellow pages for suitable companies.

Resident groups

We would love to have more resident groups in the borough so if you would like to be part of a group, start your own group or would just like more information on what it involves then please contact Jane Margetts on 01932 425824 or Jenny Hill on 01932 568405 (email jennihill@ntlworld.com).

The Tenancy Management Section carry out regular estate walkabouts and if you would like to be involved, again please contact us.



Loan sharks – beware

Look out for these signs if you think you, or someone you know, may have borrowed from a loan shark:

- a lender who gives you little or no paperwork
- a lender who won't tell you how much you still owe or what the interest rates are
- a lender who adds charges to the loan or continues to increase the amount
- a lender who takes items as 'security' (these could include passports and bank cards)
- a lender who is intimidating, threatening or violent.

The Trading Standards' illegal money lending team investigates and prosecutes loan sharks. They also help anyone who has borrowed from an illegal lender. For help or to report a loan shark, please call the confidential hot line on 0300 555 2222. Or for more information go to www.direct.gov.uk/stoploansharks

Tell us once

A new service called Tell Us Once went live in Surrey on 20 October 2011.

Losing a loved one is hard enough without the stress of paperwork and phone calls to make. Tell Us Once aims to ease this burden by allowing residents to tell multiple government agencies about a death, at the same time.

The service will be offered to all residents when they make a booking to register a death with their local registrar and the updated information will be shared with organisations such as Department for Work and Pensions, Identity and Passport Service, the DVLA, council tax and even libraries.

The service has been developed by the Department for Work and Pensions and is being used by Surrey County Council in partnership with the 11 District and Borough Councils in Surrey.

For more information about registering a death and the Tell Us Once service, please visit www.surreycc.gov.uk/registeringadeath or phone 0300 200 1002.

There will be two further stages over the next year to include Births and Change of Address notifications.

Changes to Housing Subsidy

In our April edition of Streets Ahead we mentioned proposed changes to the way council housing is funded. For a number of years councils have been part of a national subsidy system, with some paying in and others taking money out of the system. Runnymede was one of the councils paying in, and for the current year our contribution will be over £6M.

The previous Labour government recognised this was rather unfair, especially as the total paid into the subsidy system was more than paid out, and they devised a scheme to end the arrangements. The Coalition Government have continued where their predecessors left off, and from April 2012 the existing subsidy arrangements will come to an end, and Runnymede will no longer have to pay £6M+ to the government each year.

Unfortunately it is not quite as straightforward as that. For every council contributing to the subsidy system there was another receiving government cash; and they will no longer get this subsidy. To help them in future the government is to provide a one-off 'dowry', but to pay for it councils like Runnymede will have to pay a lump sum into government coffers. In effect, we are required to buy ourselves out of the present arrangements.

To finance this lump sum payment the Council will be required to borrow a figure in excess of £100M. This is a huge amount of money, but in the long term the Council has calculated that it can service this large debt from its rent income and will actually be better off than before – as the repayments on £100M will be less than the £6M+ it currently pays into the subsidy system each year. In addition, being able to borrow long term at fixed rates means we now have a degree of certainty over future finances which we did not have before, which will help with long term planning.

This financial stability means the housing service can continue to pay its way, keeping homes up to standard, and even increasing the standard we, and tenants aspire to. Tenants will continue to play a part in setting standards and helping us to decide how we target resources, and if you would like to take part in this process then the RCRA would like to hear from you. For more details please contact the RCRA Chair, Jenny Hill on 01932 568405.

Keep 'gas safe'



It is a sad fact that people still die every year from carbon monoxide poisoning which could be avoided with the right checks.

Runnymede Borough Council is required by law, to check any gas installation in its properties. This service is provided free of charge to tenants during the spring and summer months to ensure the heating systems are in good working order before the winter starts. To receive this service all you have to do is to allow our contractor the opportunity to carry out the relevant tests and inspections.

Before your system needs to be serviced you will receive a letter from our contractor, Robert Heath Heating. Some people fail to recognise this request as coming from the Council, so now your letter will have both the Robert Heath and Runnymede logos on its heading. Please do not ignore the letter. If the date for the service is inconvenient, please contact Robert Heath on the free phone number given and they will happily make an alternative appointment for you.

In an attempt to get everyone to sign up to this, including the small number for whom there can be difficulties, the Council is now taking a more robust approach and is using legal means to gain access.

There are also programme interrupters, which after a twelve month period, cause problems with running the heating if they have not been reset by an engineer. It is hoped that, by this means, tenants will be encouraged to arrange regular checks so please do co-operate with contractors and allow them access.

Over the last few years the Council has invested in new, safer, more efficient heating systems as part of the aim to provide high quality homes for tenants. However, some tenants have taken the opportunity to install their own gas fires and whilst the Council accepts this situation, it does mean that the servicing of these appliances is the tenant's responsibility and not the Council's.

A faulty open flue appliance, like a gas fire, is the most likely source of carbon monoxide (CO) poisoning. Early symptoms of CO poisoning can mimic many common ailments and may easily be confused with food poisoning, viral infections, flu or simple tiredness. Some of the symptoms to look out for include: headaches, nausea, tiredness/drowsiness, pains in the chest or stomach and erratic behaviour with a loss of co-ordination. If you think you have CO poisoning it is important to see your doctor. Easiest of all is to have these types of appliance regularly serviced and to purchase and fit a CO detector to the room with the appliance.

Help us to make you safe.

Call 01932 425858 for more information

**++ Stop Press ++
++ Stop Press ++
++ Stop Press ++**

Four of the RCRA are attending a conference on the Localism Bill in December. Watch out for updates which could affect us all in the next edition of Streets Ahead.

National Fraud Initiative

The National Fraud Initiative (NFI) has been running since 1996. It matches electronic data within and between public and private sector bodies to prevent and detect fraud. This includes local councils.

Since the start, the programme has helped identify £664 million in fraud or error.

A recent case concerned a lady who had both a tenancy in Runnymede and one in the Isle of Wight. After investigation it transpired the lady in question had held these two tenancies for almost 20 years it having taken that long to track down what had gone wrong.

The tenancy on the Isle of Wight has now been handed back and in view of the lady's age and the fact no Housing Benefit was fraudulently claimed, no further action is anticipated.

It does show though that the scheme works by data matching. So if you know of someone you think may have obtained a council property fraudulently please let us know on 01932 425850.

Tenant Inspectors

Have you ever considered becoming one of our Resident Inspectors?

You may recall, in the last Annual Report we told you about our team of resident inspectors who check the work Wyevale, the grounds maintenance contractors, carry out.

Each time Wyevale visit a site they put a card through the door of our volunteer tenant. The tenant can then ensure the correct number of cards is received from Wyevale in relation to the number of cuts that should be carried out as per the contract. Our volunteers also check the quality of the work and if they find a problem with this they let us know.

As a thank you for helping us in this regard we send our inspectors a supermarket voucher for £25 each year.

We are always looking out for more Resident Inspectors, so if you think you may be interested in becoming one please contact Jenny Hill on 01932 568405 or email jennihill@ntlworld.com.

Franklands Drive

Runnymede Borough Council has been working in partnership with Paragon Housing Group and Accent Peerless Housing Association on the development of the housing scheme to the rear of Franklands Drive. The scheme, "Viridis" includes both rented and shared ownership (part rent, part buy), properties.

The first phase will be available between January and March 2012 consisting of 94 properties and including a mix of 1, 2, 3 and 4 bedroom flats and houses.

The properties will be built to a very high specification throughout, with good quality kitchens and bathrooms as well as high energy efficiency and some of the houses will have solar panels.

The whole scheme design is contemporary and provision has been made for play areas, five a side football pitches and plenty of green space. There will be a transport scheme to link the development with Addlestone as well as a range of cycle routes and footpaths through the open parkland.

The scheme will provide much needed affordable housing and a new community to benefit residents of Runnymede. Priority for the rented housing is being given to existing tenants who may wish to live in this lovely location and in a new home. If you are interested, then please call Irene Rabbits 01932 425834.



viridis

Viridis is an exciting new development of contemporary homes and apartments available for rent or low cost home ownership (Part-Buy, Part-Rent). Set in acres of natural open parkland, close to Franklands Drive in Addlestone, these new homes will provide the ideal living environment for individuals, couples and families.



For more information please contact
Mike Rotter on 01932 425830