

THE  **FOUR  
HOUSING**

# BRIDGE.



MAGAZINE THE LATEST NEWS FROM FOUR HOUSING

Issue 2 2014



Scrutiny Panels

report back p4/5

Community

Round Up p14



Contact us on 0300 00 44 444 or email [contact@fourhousing.co.uk](mailto:contact@fourhousing.co.uk)

# What's Inside?

## Welcome from the editorial panel



As you may already know, the editorial panel is made up of tenants and leaseholders (pictured).

Our role is to make sure that The Bridge covers all the issues that are important to you. We are always looking for new panel members to give their views and ideas.

You don't have to come to meetings to do this, you can do it from the comfort of your home.

If you think you would like to join us, or even if you have an idea for a new feature or a topic for the magazine, please do get in touch.

[We look forward to hearing from you.](#)

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Front cover: (top) Local residents at the re-opening of the Pelaw Centre and (below) the estate inspection team in action.



# Message from

## Paul Tanney

Chief Executive of Four Housing



I'm pleased to see that this edition of The Bridge includes the findings of our two new customer scrutiny panels.

Getting these teams up and working has been a big undertaking for us, as well as for them. We are extremely grateful for the time they have all put in on your behalf. Please take note of their recommendations.

The repairs and maintenance team has been busy setting up new contracts. Working jointly with other housing associations we hope to save money which can then be fed back into other building projects. Take a look at page 9 to see what

works we have planned in the next six months.

With spring in the air we have asked our landscaping team to share some of their top gardening tips. No excuses for letting the grass grow now!

Finally, it's great to see the new regular features in the magazine giving tenants space for their news. The Community Round Up page is your chance to let everyone know what you've been up to. Whether it's fundraising or performing on the stage, please do let us know.

The new "Down Your Way" slot is your opportunity to tell us about the area you live in and what it means to you. So get in touch if you'd like to talk about your area.

### Star Survey on the cards



Over the next few weeks, some of you will be asked to complete a tenant satisfaction survey called the **Star Survey**. This survey is completed every two years and provides us with vital information about how you feel about the services we provide. We then use this information to make improvements.

**Not everyone will get a survey form to complete as participants are randomly selected.** However, if you do get one, please can we ask you to take the time to fill it in. The more forms we get returned to us, the more accurate our data will be, and the more likely we are to make the right decisions on your behalf.

# Customer scrutiny panels report back

## Good - could do better!

That's the verdict of the two customer scrutiny panels after they took a close look at the way repairs are handled and our customer service.

Service managers were interviewed and panel members also observed how staff carried out their roles.

The scrutiny panels are made up of tenants and leaseholders with independent support. They look at how well Four Housing is performing and how it compares with similar organisations.

The panels made a number of recommendations for improvement. An action plan to carry out recommendations has been agreed by the Four Housing Board.

## Repairs Scrutiny Review

This review was prompted by a dip in performance on completing emergency and urgent repairs in time between January and March 2013. Closer investigation showed that this was a 'one off'. It was because of problems arising with the existing contractor before they were due to be replaced. The panel also looked at wider issues to do with the repairs service.

### Key findings and recommendations

**Offer appointments at the point a repair is reported:** The panel felt this was important to enable people to organise their lives around work and other commitments.

**Our response:** Appointments will be phased in from summer 2014.

**Contractors should always make an appointment in advance of visiting tenants:**

The panel found that sometimes contractors were calling without doing this.

**Our response:** We will remind contractors to do this and check this is happening through customer satisfaction surveys.

**Make sure all repairs staff are kept up to date with plans for major improvements:**

The panel felt this would help them make the right decisions on what to repair and what to replace.

**Our response:** We will increase the number of briefings to make sure contractors and staff are kept up to date.

**Four Housing should learn from the problems with the contractor handover early in 2013 to prevent similar problems happening again:**

**Our response:** We have changed our contracting arrangements to reduce the risk of this happening again. We will also involve customers on our service improvement groups in reviewing contracts.

**All contractors should identify themselves as representing or visiting on behalf of Four Housing:**

**Our response:** We will remind all contractors about this at individual contract meetings and identify ways of spot checking this with our involved customers.

# Customer Service Review

This review looked at how easy it was for customers to get hold of the right person and how helpful the staff were.

Overall the panel found that Four Housing has knowledgeable staff with a good attitude. Contact centre staff were observed to 'go the extra mile' when dealing with calls.

## Key findings and recommendations

### Four Housing should make sure the contact centre has enough staff to take calls at peak times:

**Our response:** We will introduce a new process to make sure we are prepared for planned events like rent increase letters that might lead to more calls.

### Four Housing should review the telephone menu system:

There were too many options and these were leading to delays.

**Our response:** We will look to improve this in the future.

### Establish realistic timescales for responding to customer calls:

The panel found that there is an internal agreement to return calls within 24 hours, but questioned whether this is realistic for housing officers who are often 'out on the patch'.

**Our response:** We will work with involved customers to establish new timescales for responding and resolving calls.

### Carry out a further tenant satisfaction (Star) survey this year:

The panel found the information in the 2012 survey very useful and wants to check progress made since then.

**Our response:** We will carry out a further survey in June this year (see page 3).

Quote from Bill Worth, Four Housing chair:

**"We welcome the constructive approach both panels have taken in these reviews. The recommendations will lead to service improvements that will be of benefit to all customers. Well done!"**

Quote from a scrutiny panel member:

**"We've really enjoyed doing these reviews. We look forward to seeing the action plans carried out!"**



*Members of the Customer Scrutiny Panel celebrating its first year.*

## Next steps...

Tenants in our service improvement groups will be checking that these actions are carried out over the months ahead. In the meantime the two scrutiny panels are busy sorting out what they will review next. We will keep you updated.

Want to know more? Contact us on 0300 00 44 444, email [getinvolved@fourhousing.co.uk](mailto:getinvolved@fourhousing.co.uk) or visit our website [www.fourhousing.co.uk](http://www.fourhousing.co.uk)

# Knowing your Supported

## Housing Officer

Following on from the last issue of *The Bridge*, this time we would like to introduce you to the Supported Housing team.

The Supported Housing Officers provide housing management and other services to vulnerable tenants who live in a variety of homes across the North East. They complement the day to day support provided on site by specialist care and support providers.

A large part of their role is managing the relationships between different organisations such as local authorities, health services and social workers.

The team also makes sure that tenants are supported to pay their rent and manage their tenancies. They will also help if people are experiencing difficulties living in their homes as a result of anti-social behaviour.

The team covers a lot of ground in a year, with over 90 supported housing schemes located from Newcastle all the way down to Redcar and Cleveland. Their services are provided to all sorts of people who need a bit of extra help to live independently.



Alyson Hall



Wendy Quirk



Kelly Nash

## Teesdale House

Teesdale House in Bishop Auckland is an example of our supported housing. It provides accommodation for six younger people between 16-25. Staff employed by Stonham are based there and give lots of help and advice on everything from applying for jobs, learning to cook, to managing money and finding a permanent home.

The accommodation is shared, although everyone has their own bedroom. One tenant recently told us “living in an environment with 5 other people, all from very different backgrounds, is quite strange and daunting at first. With time it becomes the norm and eventually the project allows you to change your life for the better”.

The partnership with Stonham and Four Housing in Teesdale House means that some of our youngest tenants have been able to turn round their lives and go on to achieve more than they thought possible.



Paul Tanney with staff and tenants at Teesdale House.



# New Properties

## Springhill Homes Underway...



**Work has now begun on a new housing development at Springhill, Berwick.**

We are building 40 new houses, which includes 10 bungalows designed specifically for older people. The rest will be two and three bedroom homes. All will be energy efficient, will have private gardens and parking spaces. 30 of the new homes will be available for affordable rent and 10 for shared ownership. Shared ownership gives you the chance to part buy and part rent your home.

If you would like to know more about these properties or about shared ownership, then get in touch. To apply for one of our new homes you will need to register with the Northumberland Homefinder. Application Forms can be downloaded from the Homefinder website at:

**[www.northumberlandhomefinder.org.uk](http://www.northumberlandhomefinder.org.uk)**

Alternatively ring our customer services team on **0300 00 44 444** to ask for one.

## Sherburn Road Bungalows Opening



*Roberta Blackman-Woods with guests and residents at the official opening.*

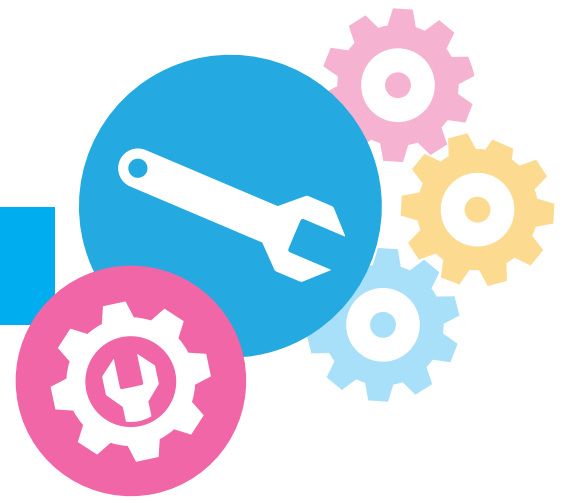
City of Durham MP Roberta Blackman-Woods was on hand to do the honours at the official opening of our new bungalows Sherburn Road in early May.

The six purpose built bungalows at Cuthbert Avenue have been specially designed for the elderly or those with similar needs. Five of the six bungalows have already been let and the final tenant is due to sign up any day now.

One of the tenants due to move in shortly told us how much she was looking forward to it.

*"I'm really excited about moving into my new home. It's good that the bungalows are so near to the community centre and I'm looking forward to trying out some of the activities there."*

# Handyperson Service goes from Strength to Strength



The Durham team has just been awarded another three year contract by the County Council to continue their good work in County Durham. The service also operates in Northumberland and Redcar.

If you are 60 or over, vulnerable or disabled, and live in one of these areas you can make use of the service to sort out a range of small DIY jobs around your home such as putting up shelves, changing light bulbs or fitting grab rails. For many tenants the work may well be free. In some cases there may be a small charge. This will be explained to you before any work starts.

## To find out more...

Contact your nearest Handyperson centre on one of the numbers listed below.

Northumberland **01670 851 952**

Redcar **01642 777 780**

County Durham **0300 456 2220**

Mark From Northumberland:

**“This is an excellent service and has helped my mother to stay independent in her own home. The advice and the work carried out has been first class.”**

Ava From Redcar: **“I cannot praise the staff and service enough. It helps to maintain an older person’s dignity.”**

## Your Feedback

We have introduced a new policy on managing customer comments, compliments and complaints from 1st April. It aims to make sure that we are responding quickly and effectively to the issues you raise and that we use the feedback to improve our services.

The new policy has been produced following a review carried out with customers and staff and focuses on a ‘right first time’ approach for complaints. It moves away from three complaint stages to a simpler two phase process. In the first instance front line staff will aim to resolve issues as quickly as possible, with a target time

of 10 working days if problems can’t be sorted out immediately. If customers feel their issues have not been resolved the second phase is a review by a Head of Service.

There is also an increased role for customers in monitoring and scrutinising how we handle and learn from complaints and other feedback.

For a copy of our policy please visit us at [www.fourhousing.co.uk](http://www.fourhousing.co.uk), or contact us on **0300 00 44 444** or email [contact@fourhousing.co.uk](mailto:contact@fourhousing.co.uk)



# Major Improvement

## Work

Large schemes starting between April and September 2014

Major Improvement Work (Large schemes)	South	North
Doors and Windows replacement	Hartlepool – Arch Court and Longscar Walk	Lower Tweedmouth – Albert Place and Union Park Road
Boilers or Heating System replacements	Sunderland – Cedar Grange Ferryhill – Bessemer Street	
Kitchen replacements	Gateshead – Nile Court Barrington Terrace	
Bathroom replacements	Ferryhill – Bessemer Street Darlington – Dene Park Court	Berwick – Church Street
Roofing Works		Wooler – Oliver Road, Oliver Place, Weetwood Avenue. Spittal – Sunnyside Crescent. Prior Park – Hawthorn Crescent and Springdale
Electrical Rewiring	Ferryhill – Bessemer Street Darlington – Dene Park Court	
External Works – including paving		Prior Park – Dene Drive and Braeside. Wooler – Threefolds, The Martins and Oliver Place



We try to give you as much notice as possible about work planned in your home. We will contact you between 7 and 12 weeks beforehand to discuss what's involved and help you prepare.



Please note that all the projects are subject to a survey before work starts. If this highlights that work has already been completed in your home in recent years, the work will not be carried out.



There will also be other major improvements carried out in smaller schemes/ estates in the next 6 months. So if you can't find your home in this list, but were expecting to get work done, don't worry. **Just contact the asset team on 0300 00 44 444 or email [contact@fourhousing.co.uk](mailto:contact@fourhousing.co.uk)**



# Joining Forces to Save on Repair Costs



A new project has seen us join forces with two of the region's other housing associations to secure a better deal on our repairs and maintenance contracts.



We have linked up with the North Star Housing Group and Two Castles Housing Association. Between us we manage more than 11,000 properties. By combining our repairs and maintenance needs, we have been able to secure fixed price contracts at great rates for up to the next four years.

The contracts will support the work carried out by our own workforce who will continue to carry out about 50% of repairs.

The three successful contractors are all based in the region and are experienced in this type of work.

They are PF Burridge & Sons from Newcastle, Sunter Limited from Houghton-le-Spring and the Esh Group who are based in Northumberland.

As well as cutting costs, the new contracts set high standards for all the contractors to meet. We will be monitoring their performance closely to make sure these are delivered.

You can help by letting us know what you think in the satisfaction survey we send you after your repair.

You said

Tenants on our service improvement groups and mystery shoppers said they would like staff to be easily identifiable.

We did

We have introduced name badges for all staff.

This means

The names of all staff will be clearly visible.

# Springing into

## Life

With spring in the air and summer just around the corner, our editorial panel was keen to find some seasonal advice for the gardeners amongst you. We asked our landscaping contractors Deerness for their advice and here are some of their top tips:

### Overhaul your tools -

Clean and repair garden tools and book the lawn mower in for a service.

### Tidy up the woodwork -

This is a good time to check for rot and to treat sheds, fences and trellis to a coat of wood preservative. Brushes and rollers are fine for most things but a sprayer is well worth buying for tricky projects such as woven panels!

### Wage war on slugs and snails -

These pests love those delicious young shoots now coming through. Use pet-friendly slug pellets around your plants and drench the ground with liquid slug killer to get the ones below the surface. Keep an eye out for snails and pick them off (if you're brave). The birds are your friends here and a flat stone, carefully placed, will help them practise their snail catching techniques.

### Get Composting -

A great way to transform kitchen and garden waste into something useful. Compost is cheap and easy to make and use. New research has found that almost half of the food waste in our rubbish bins could have been composted.

What are you waiting for?



# Berwick Community

## Development Fund

### Bell View in the Spotlight

The Bell View Resource Centre in Belford, Northumberland is one of many community projects that have been supported over the years by funds from the Berwick Community Development Fund.

Belford is very rural and the centre supports elderly people to live independently in the community.

Two Bell View projects have recently been awarded money from the Community Development Fund. Last year money was given for gym equipment for a project named the "Silver Sneakers" which saw the Centre providing fitness sessions for older people.



*Visiting a Silver Sneakers session.*

This year Bell View has been given just over £1,000 for a project to help people in the community get online.

By providing drop in sessions once a week, the Centre hopes to teach its visitors how to make the most of the internet, to help with getting information, paying bills and keeping in touch with family and friends.



## Project Funding Awards for 2013 - 2014

Projects that have received grants from this year's fund include, Three Fields Residents Association for picnic tables and planters at Westfield and equipment hire for an estate clean up in Newfields, Highfields and Westfield. Clifftops Residents Group is receiving a start-up grant as well as seeing new signage throughout the Eastcliffe and Highcliffe Estates.

Berwick Community Development Trust will be offering energy advice to Four Housing tenants by looking at energy efficiency in their homes and helping to try to reduce energy bills.

Child safety home packs have been funded in partnership with SureStart and will be offered to Four Housing tenants with young children.

We look forward to seeing how these projects and others progress throughout the year.

## How to Apply

The Community Development Fund runs from 1 April 2014 to 31 March 2015. Applications for funding are welcomed from Community Groups within the Berwick area, in particular for projects that benefit Four Housing tenants. If you have a project that you would like funding, **contact us on 0300 00 44 444 or email [contact@fourhousing.co.uk](mailto:contact@fourhousing.co.uk).**



## Inspections

Don't miss out on your estate inspection. It is your chance to tour your estate with your Housing Officer, the police and other agencies and point out those problem areas and things that need to be fixed.

To find out the date of an inspection in your area, visit our website [www.fourhousing.co.uk](http://www.fourhousing.co.uk) or contact your Housing Officer on **0300 00 44 444** or email [contact@fourhousing.co.uk](mailto:contact@fourhousing.co.uk)

The more people who get involved in the estate inspections the more successful they will be.

Kevin Taylor lives at Dunelm Court, Brandon near Durham. He regularly attends these inspections and says, "I wish we could get

more people to come along. I live on a small estate and the tours around are actually very interesting and I quite enjoy them. You get to meet the neighbours and pick out things that need to be done to make the area a nicer place to live."

Desmond Dixon lives at Eastcliffe near Berwick. "The new system is much better because it gets all the right people together at once. There were quite a few different tenants who came along to ours which is good as they all notice different things such as mums with their pushchairs having trouble with the paving in one place or the fact that weeds need sorting out in another. Things that if you don't live here you wouldn't know about."

## Getting Things Sorted

Here are some examples of how getting involved can get things sorted:

**You said:** Residents on a Hartlepool Estate raised concerns that their bin storage was no longer adequate when their old bins were replaced with wheelie bins by the Council.

**We did:** In consultation with residents, we designed new communal bays for recycling and new individual bin stores for household waste.

**This means:** It is now easier for tenants to store their rubbish and recycling.

**You said:** The residents of Westfield, Berwick asked for additional security fencing to prevent anti-social behaviour activity behind a garage site.

**We did:** We provided some new metal fencing, funded by our Estates Initiative Budget.

**This means:** The new fencing prevents access to the site and residents feel safer as a result.

## Need a

## Home Visit?

.....  
**Want to speak to a housing officer in person and can't get in to our offices?** We can come to you. All you have to do is give us a call to arrange a home visit. **We look forward to hearing from you!**



*An estate inspection in action.*

# Community Round Up



*Local residents at the re-opening of the Pelaw Centre.*

## Welcome Back Pelaw View

The Pelaw View Community Centre on the Sherburn Road estate in Durham is open again for business as usual. The centre had been closed since December when high winds damaged the roof.

The centre now has a new manager, Mark Hatcher. As well as managing the place, Mark's role will be to work with the centre's volunteers to apply for more funding for the many projects and activities they run. He will also be looking to develop support sessions for local people when applying for jobs or seeking to re-train and gain new work skills.



Tenants and staff from the Berwick-upon-Tweed area took to the stage at the Maltings theatre in Berwick in May as part of a community choir in a production called "Get Up and Tie Your Fingers." The performance is set against a real event, the Eyemouth Fishing Disaster of 1881 when twenty boats were lost and 129 men and boys drowned.

If the fleets came in when people were still in bed, a villager had the job of going around the village to awaken the fleets down the coast to meet the catch and gut the herrings. The phrase "get up and tie your fingers" refers to the practice of tying rags around the hand holding the fish, so that the fingers were protected from the gutting knife.

Known as the 'herring lassies', they followed the fishing fleets down the coast to meet the catch and gut the herrings. The phrase "get up and tie your fingers" refers to the practice of tying rags around the hand holding the fish, so that the fingers were protected from the gutting knife.

## Get up and tie your fingers!

The show focuses on the women from the fishing communities along the east coast of Scotland and England in the 1800s.

Known as the 'herring lassies', they followed the fishing fleets down the

the fishwives by shouting: "get up and tie your fingers!"

Ruby Watt was one of the Four Housing tenants taking part. "When I was at school I was told not to sing because I had a very deep voice, so when I told my family what I was doing they all laughed, but it's been great fun," says Ruby.

"It's a really interesting project. I didn't know about the Eyemouth fishing disaster before. So many local families lost loved ones and the whole community suffered terribly. It was very poignant but I have really enjoyed taking part."

Others taking part were tenant, Anne Hindmarsh and Four Housing staff, Caroline Dryden and Bernie Hogg (pictured).



# Down Your Way



David Gibson

**Estate/Place where you live:**  
Stanhope in Weardale. County Durham.

**How long have you lived in the area?** Nine years.

**How would you describe the area where you live to someone who doesn't know it?**

Stanhope is a small market town situated on the River Wear. It is surrounded by moorland and has many attractions including an open air heated swimming pool and stepping stones across the river. These lead to the show field, the venue for the local agricultural show and other events, also to Stanhope Cricket Club. The railway station is home to the Weardale railway which runs the hugely popular heritage train service which recently featured in the TV show, George Gently.

**Give us one "little known fact" about the area:**

In the grounds of the church there is a fossil tree. It is believed to be 320 million years old and would have been as much as 30 metres

high. Behind the market square is an area called the Butts, so named because it was the site of the Archery Butts in the days of the long bow where local men practised the skills that helped England win the Battle of Agincourt in 1415.

**What do you see as the best thing about where you live?**

How friendly people are. When we're out and about people we don't even know will say hello and will stop for a chat. Perhaps because life is slower in the country and we have fewer deadlines to meet.

**If you could change one thing, what would it be?**

If I could change anything it would be the links to the outside world. Better public transport, particularly in the evenings and at weekends.



Eleanor Tindle

**Estate/Place where you live:**  
Prior Park, Berwick, Northumberland.

**How long have you lived in the area?**

I've lived in the area since 2001 but on this estate for the past seven years.

**How would you describe the area where you live to someone who doesn't know it?**

Berwick is a friendly and beautiful little town with stunning coastline and surrounded by beautiful countryside. It's sleepy and lively all rolled into one.

**Give us one "little known fact" about the area:**

I'm led to believe that Prior Park

estate was once a farm. There was also supposedly a monastery here which is where the names Prior and Dean come from.

**What do you see as the best thing about where you live?**

Although Berwick is a town, it has a small community feel. Whether it's to support local talent or charity, everyone pulls together in a big way.

**If you could change one thing, what would it be?**

More entertainment, sport and leisure facilities.

**If you would like to tell us about your area in a future issue of The Bridge, just get in touch.**

# Customer Engagement

## Strategy

### Get involved with us and make a difference!

We have just agreed a new customer engagement strategy. It sets out how we will make sure you as tenants and leaseholders can have a real influence over our key decisions and the services we provide. It is available on our website or by giving us a ring on **0300 00 44 444**.

You said  
You should involve more younger customers.  
We did  
The new strategy includes actions to find out how our younger customers would like to be involved.



*Getting together at a tenants' event.*

The main aim of the strategy is to encourage more people to get involved. We have produced some frequently asked questions below to get you thinking about it.

### Why should I get involved?

You can give us your views on our services and help us improve. You could also learn new skills and make new friends.

### What are the different ways to get involved?

There are many different ways, so you can choose what suits you best. For example filling in occasional surveys or taking part in an estate inspection.

Some involve coming to meetings with us, for example being part of a Service Improvement Group. These groups meet with us every three months to look at a particular service and help identify improvements. We have groups covering repairs, customer service, estate management and anti-social behaviour.

### How much time will getting involved take up?

It depends how you decide to get involved. If you don't have much time there are lots of quick ways you can get involved, for example giving your views by text, email or phone.

### Do I need any special skills or knowledge?

No, it's your experience as a tenant or leaseholder that counts.

### What support will I get?

We will provide you with all the help you need to take part including covering any travel costs or help with childcare.

### I'm interested, what do I need to do?

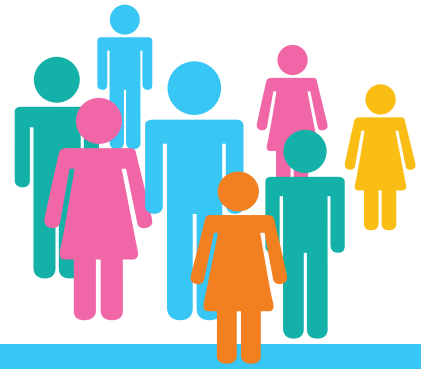
Just get in touch by ringing us on **0300 00 44 444** or emailing us on [contact@fourhousing.co.uk](mailto:contact@fourhousing.co.uk) and we will discuss the involvement activities you are interested in.



*Tenants discussing improvements.*

You said  
You should give us more feedback about how our views have been used.  
We did  
We will make sure we give you feedback after every involvement activity and give everyone updates at least once a year.

We look forward to hearing from you!



## What's the benefit?

This is the latest in a series of regular information sheets aimed at keeping you up to date with the welfare benefit changes.

In the last issue of The Bridge we introduced you to the new Financial Inclusion Team who are here to give you advice about money, debt and benefits.



### First year for the Financial Inclusion team



In our first year the team (pictured) has been extremely busy. To date we have helped over 1,000 households with financial advice, provided information on the range of benefits currently available and on planned benefits changes. We have helped those affected by under occupation or the bedroom tax, to get discretionary payments to tide them over while dealing with the impact of this major lifestyle change. We have also helped resolve benefits disputes and assisted tenants in making new claims. The result so far is an extra £700,000 of income raised for tenants we have advised.

Our current success rate is 70 per cent. [So what are you waiting for? Get in touch.](#)

You can email us on [fi.team@fourhousing.co.uk](mailto:fi.team@fourhousing.co.uk) or just give us a call on **0300 00 44 444**



We are available Monday to Friday 9.30 to 12.30am and 1.30 to 3.30pm. If we are unable to take your call please leave a message and someone will get back to you within 24 hours.



# Universal Credit

The challenge for the year ahead is to carry out some important work around Universal Credit and make sure all of you affected have the information you need.

## Are you of working age and claiming any of the following?

.....

-  help with your rent
-  child tax credits
-  working tax credits
-  Job Seeker's Allowance
-  Employment Support Allowance
-  Income Support

## If so you need to know about Universal Credit.

.....

We will be getting in touch with all households with members of working age shortly. This is your opportunity to make the most of the team's specialist knowledge and find out what this new benefit means for you. In the meantime, if you want a visit or just a chat – get in touch.

# Benefit Changes

## From April 2014

April saw the start of a number of changes to the benefits system.

### Appeals

You are no longer able to go straight to an appeal if you feel a Department for Work and Pensions decision to be wrong or unfair. Instead you must first ask for your claim to be reconsidered. If you are challenging a decision made on a claim for Employment and Support Allowance, you will need to claim Jobseeker's Allowance while your challenge is reconsidered and a decision reached.

### Personal Independence Payment

This is the payment which replaces the Disability Living Allowance (DLA) and which has now been introduced throughout the country. You may have read in the papers about some of the problems disabled people have faced since the switch over. You should not let this put you off from claiming.

When your DLA is due to end, the Department of Work and Pensions will send you a letter. It is essential that you follow the instructions in this letter. If you don't you may have a period when you get no payments at all.

A new system has been set up which sends text messages to claimants to let them know that their application has been received and is being processed. After this the company responsible for organising any required medicals will be in touch by letter. They will explain what you need to do next. Be aware, the changeover process can take around six months to complete.

### Claimant Commitment

This has now been introduced for all jobseekers. Under this new scheme, if you are out of work and claiming benefits you will be expected to sign an agreement. This sets out what you will do to find work. If you fail to meet the conditions set out in this agreement, you can be penalised. Your benefit can be reduced or withheld for anything from several days to three years. The length of time will depend on the number of times you have breached your agreement.

## Benefit Cap

The Benefit Cap now operates nationally. It limits the maximum amount of money you can receive from certain benefits. The cap or limit on benefits will not apply to households where someone is claiming Working Tax Credit or Disability Living Allowance.

## Carers Allowance

From 20 May 2014 you can earn up to £102 a week and still claim Carer's Allowance without being penalised. This is to help those people working 16 hours at the minimum wage, who lost their Carer's Allowance when the minimum wage was increased last year. They should now qualify again, as the limit has now been raised.



New

## Telephone Numbers

As of March this year there is a new phone number and new text number for advice on Income Support, Jobseeker's Allowance, Employment and Support Allowance and Incapacity Benefit. The new phone number is **0345 608 8545**, and the number for texts is **0345 608 8551**. Both of these numbers can also be called using the 0845 prefix instead of **0345**. In general the **0845** code is cheaper for calls from landlines and **0345** from mobiles.