

UNDER ONE ROOF

DECEMBER 2012

A MONTHLY ROUNDUP OF LOCAL
AND NATIONAL HOUSING NEWS

ISSUE 11



CHANGES TO BENEFITS

The Government is reducing the amount of Housing Benefit and/or Council Tax support some people can claim. Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils have produced a leaflet that will help you find out:

- ✓ Who will be affected
- ✓ Where you can go to get help and advice

This leaflet is available on both Councils' websites via the following links:

<http://www.babergh.gov.uk/assets/Uploads-BDC/Transformation/Revenues/Benefits/NHF-BDC-Leaflet.pdf>

<http://www.midsuffolk.gov.uk/assets/UploadsMSDC/Transformation/Revenues/Benefits/NHF-MSDC-Leaflet.pdf>



NEW JOINT TENANTS' WEBSITE

Sometimes in life we have time to sit and do nothing in particular. It's those times when ideas begin to seed in our minds. One evening I was sat looking at the television and not really doing very much. I picked up my laptop and began to browse the internet for anything more interesting than TV; then I got an email offering me the chance to set up a free website. Suddenly I thought about the Tenants' Forum. After discussions with members of both of the Tenants' Forums I took up the offer of the free website and opened a joint Website for both Mid Suffolk and Babergh called 'Tenants Aware'.

Here it is: <http://tenantsaware.ning.com>.

Joining the site

To join the website all that is needed is your email address email address and a password.

Have a chat

Do you remember when you were younger there was a place where you spoke with special people in your life? E.g. I used to talk with my Mum or my Auntie over a cup of tea at the kitchen table; well, this is a similar place on the website, a place where you can have a chat over a cup of tea or coffee or whatever. It would be so good to see you there and to chat with you, in real time, with a real person; you never know you might even make a friend!! So here we are, just pop in and say 'hi'!

We look forward to seeing you there. If you have any questions, please email me at btforum@aol.com or contact the Tenant Involvement Team by calling 01449 724781, or email Tenant.Involvement@midsuffolk.gov.uk. Alternatively you can leave me a message at the Tenants' Forum desk and I will ring you back.

Thank you for reading my article.

Liz Perryman

Contact: Liz Perryman, Babergh Tenants' Forum Member and Joint Housing Board Member, Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils. Email: btforum@aol.com or Tenant.Involvement@midsuffolk.gov.uk.

WELFARE REFORM

The Government has passed legislation that will change many aspects of the current benefits system. In the longer term, these changes will result in a single universal credit rather than the many different entitlements currently available. In the short to medium term the changes will mean that the amount of money available for certain benefits will be capped and the eligibility criteria for others may be different. Most of these changes are being overseen by the Department for Work & Pensions.

How does this affect Babergh & Mid Suffolk?

The Councils' role in these cases is therefore, one of:

- Guiding customers and other interested parties to relevant information. We will do this by providing key contact details on our websites and ensuring that our customer service staff have them to hand at all times;
- Producing short punchy leaflets with key information about each of the areas being changed with key contact details for the Department for Work & Pensions and other independent organisations, such as the Citizens Advice Bureau.

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RAMBLINGS FROM LIZ IN BABERGH

I wanted to explain how things have shaped my firm belief in tenants.

I was born and raised in a different environment from most people. Having parents who are ordained Ministers in the Salvation Army, I saw how people's circumstances can change suddenly through no fault of their own. I learnt how much talent and natural abilities ordinary people have.

Amongst the people I live near, is a whole variety of knowledge. There are people from all walks of life, and as many different skills as there are people. There is a neighbourhood watch system set up, which at first there were lots of excuses as to why people could not take part, work commitments, illness, age, disability etc. Well, as far as work was concerned, people leave and come home they can see things as they do this. One thing I heard was a person was saying that they wanted to take part, but was not able to due to being registered blind. The coordinator spoke to the person and explained that being blind they would hear better than a sighted person might. This person is now an integral part of the team. As you can see from my example, everyone has a talent or a skill. Perhaps yours is more practical and that's fine; practical people are always needed.

Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils need tenants to be able to get involved and use our abilities to be part of the Councils' decision and policy making etc.

Council officers are not mind readers, they don't know what we think, want or need, so why not tell them calmly and politely? When a survey form comes through the door, fill it in and send it back. That's one way of being involved; how long does it take to answer a couple of questions? This simple action tells the Council how you feel about something, it's not rocket science.

I believe in tenants, and know we can make a difference, so let us show we can! Things are changing whether we like it or not, so we need to manage the change by getting involved and letting the Councils know how we feel and think. The days of the submissive and quiet tenant are over; time for tenants to stand up and speak. The attitude of 'that'll do the tenants' will not do anymore. Please be involved and take a stand for what is right. Ask your Council how you can get involved. As a paraphrase from J. F. Kennedy:

'Ask not what the Council can do for you, ask what you can do for the Council'.

It's all about taking responsibility and making a personal investment in the area where you live, not money but time and effort. I believe in you all to do the right thing.

Contact: Liz Perryman, Babergh Tenants' Forum Member and Joint Housing Board Member, Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils. Email: Tenant.Involvement@midsuffolk.gov.uk.

THE HOUSING OMBUDSMAN

From April 2013 the Housing Ombudsman will take over the handling of complaints from council tenants and other housing customers. The two key changes included in the new scheme are its extension to include council landlords and amendments to reflect the creation of Designated Persons, as introduced by the Localism Act. Designated Persons can be a local district councillor, the local MP or a designated Tenants Panel.

The system for handling housing complaints is proposed to have three stages: all landlords to whom the scheme applies are expected to have their own system for handling complaints; complainants who are not satisfied with the outcome of this stage can raise their complaint with a Designated Person. The Ombudsman will not normally consider a complaint unless it has already been through these two stages, or if eight weeks has elapsed since the end of the first stage.

The scheme will apply equally to council landlords and other Registered Providers, except for two important differences. The Ombudsman's work in relation to councils will be funded by the Department for Communities and Local Government, while other Registered Providers are expected to pay a per-property levy for the service. The other difference is that while the Housing Ombudsman has powers to take up complaints about pretty much any aspect of a housing association's activities, his remit in relation to councils is confined to housing activities, insofar as they relate to the provision and management of social housing.

Other aspects of a council's work, including non-landlord housing activities, remain within the remit of the Local Government Ombudsman.

REFERENCE: Association of Retained Council Housing, 'The Housing Ombudsman Consults', 19/10/2012, Matthew Warburton. Available at: <http://www.arch-housing.org.uk>.

THE HOUSING REPORT

The third Housing Report has been published, which is the coalition's midterm review with the National Housing Federation and Shelter. Half way through the parliamentary term is an appropriate time to reflect on government's record so far by assessing performance against the Coalition's stated housing objectives. The latest data for England has been assessed under ten main headings, allocating four red lights, four ambers and two greens.

The three organisations summarise that the coalition government is failing to fix Britain's broken housing market. They are warning that the government needs to switch its focus to delivering more affordable homes.

REFERENCE: The Chartered Institute of Housing, 'The Housing Report'. 15/11/2012. Available at: http://www.cih.org/housingreport?utm_medium=email&utm_source=Chartered+Institute+of+Housing&utm_campaign=1757268_News+and+views+14+November+2012&dm_i=YRX,11NX0,7E6H64,37LNU,1.

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PROVIDING MORTGAGES FOR LOCAL FIRST-TIME BUYERS

Sandwell Council is offering loans to prospective buyers in a test of whether councils can help solve the housing crisis. Sandwell Council will provide up to 95% mortgages for first-time buyers looking to buy a new build property. First time buyers would then only have to find a deposit of at least 5%.

There are lots of expert views on the nature and scale of the UK's housing crisis. There are, however, at least two core problems on which everyone can agree: one is that first-time buyers need help to get a foot on the first rung of the housing ladder; the other is that the country needs to build more homes. Any initiative that helps on both these fronts should therefore be worth looking at. Sandwell Council is hoping that a new affordable mortgage scheme will fit the bill.

REFERENCE: *Guardian Professional – Housing Network Blog*, 'Why one council is providing mortgages for local first-time buyers', 06/11/2012, Steve Eling, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Strategic Resources at Sandwell Council. Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/housing-network/2012/nov/06/sandwell-council-first-time-buyer-mortgages?CMP=>.

CONSULTATIONS, EQUALITY AND THE BUREAUCRATIC SYSTEM

Prime Minister David Cameron signalled significant changes in the government's approach to consultations and equality impact assessments in a speech to the Confederation of British Industry. He talked about the need for government to tackle problems caused by delays in the bureaucratic system.

Cameron promised that instead of a three month consultation on everything, ministers would be free to decide how long a consultation period is actually needed in each case.

He goes on to say that if there is no need for a consultation, then there will not be one. He also announced that government are calling time on equality impact assessments, saying that they were no longer required if equalities issues have been properly considered.

He explained that people who consider equalities issues while they're making the policy don't need all the extra tick-box stuff. No formal requirement exists in the new public sector Equality Duty to complete equality impact assessments.

REFERENCE: *HouseMark, Coalition Watch*, 'Cameron calls time on bureaucratic rubbish', 20/11/2012. Available at: http://www.coalitionwatch.info/2012/11/cameron-calls-time-on-bureaucratic.html?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+coalitionwatch+%28CoalitionWatch+from+HouseMark%29

THE HOMELESSNESS DUTY

The government has published statutory guidance outlining the changes that the Localism Act 2011 made to homelessness legislation from 9 November 2012. Councils will now be considered to have fulfilled their duty by offloading their responsibility into the private sector by helping homeless people find homes to rent from private landlords. In the past, households assessed as homeless by a local authority and found in priority need, would be found temporary accommodation, followed by a lifetime social housing tenancy.

There are worries that at its worst, the private rented sector is unstable, poor quality and even dangerous and that the most vulnerable people will be placed there as a consequence of decades of under-investment in new social housing. It is also thought that welfare reform may mean many vulnerable households will be found private sector homes where rents are cheaper, but miles from family, friends and their local communities.

Mark Prisk, Housing Minister, said that the new changes would make waiting lists fairer, helping councils fulfil their legal duty to those in need of homelessness help without the extra expense of long-term temporary accommodation. He said that new protections in place would ensure that every rented home offered by councils would be good quality suitable accommodation, offered for sufficient time to allow households the space to resolve a homelessness crisis.

REFERENCES: *HouseMark, Coalition Watch*, 'Private sector offers end homelessness duty', 08/11/2012. Available at: <http://www.coalitionwatch.info/2012/11/private-sector-offers-end-homelessness.html>.

The Guardian, News - 'Vulnerable homeless people face an astonishing shift in housing policy', 13/11/2012, Hannah Fearn. Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2012/nov/13/vulnerable-homeless-people-housing-policy?CMP=>



AUTUMN STATEMENT HEADLINES

Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne delivered his 2012 Autumn Statement to Parliament on 5 December 2012.

Below are some headlines of the announcements made:

- ✓ Local government will be exempt from budget cuts in 2013-14 as they have already been reduced through the decision to allow local authorities to hold council tax down in that year;
- ✓ A further £3.7 billion cut from welfare spending in 2015-16. This follows on from the £18 billion cut in welfare spending already announced for 2014-15. These cuts to spending will be used to fund £5.5 billion of additional infrastructure development including new housing, new roads and free schools amongst other areas;
- ✓ Most working age benefits and tax credits (excluding disability and carers benefits) will be go up by 1 per cent for three years from April 2013;
- ✓ Extra support will be provided for those on low and middle incomes by increasing the personal allowance by a further £235 in April 2013, taking it to a total of £9,440;
- ✓ Around £225 million of the funding will be used to accelerate delivery of large housing sites, supporting around 50,000 homes, and around £190 million will be used to prepare public sector land, enabling the quicker disposal of surplus sites for new homes;
- ✓ It has been confirmed that the government will respond to the consultation on proposals to introduce an income threshold for social housing above which tenants would be expected to pay full market rents by the 2013 Budget;
- ✓ The Statement did not include a cut to housing benefit for under 25 year olds;
- ✓ George Osborne confirmed the government's support to the package of measures to boost UK house building it outlined on 6 September 2012;
- ✓ Pensioner benefits will not be affected by the changes;
- ✓ The government will introduce a Welfare Up-rating Bill to implement the changes.

REFERENCES: *Local Government Information Unit, 'Autumn Statement Briefing 2012', 05/12/2012, Lizzie Greenhalgh and Marian Ogun. Available at: <http://www.lgiu.org.uk/briefing/autumn-statement-2012-briefing/> (member access only).*

HouseMark News - Issue 606, 'Autumn Statement 2012', 05/12/2012. Available at: <http://www.housemark.co.uk/Newsletter.nsf/Newsletters/606?OpenDocument>.

FUNDING BOOST TO TACKLE EMPTY HOMES

Don Foster, Communities Minister, has announced the opening of bidding for a share of £300 million. The funding will bring thousands of additional empty homes back into use across England.

The minister pledged to stop the rot that empty homes can bring to blighted neighbourhoods and said that he wants to go much further in tackling the problem. Under the scheme 5,000 empty, and in many cases derelict, properties will be refurbished and put back onto the market over the next three years.

Latest figures show the number of empty homes dropped from 300,000 in 2009 to 259,000 in 2012, and today's new funding is in addition to the £160 million ministers have already committed to bringing empty homes back into use.

The government has also given councils greater powers to tackle empty homes locally. Local councils and other providers, such as housing associations will be able to bid for money from a £300m fund announced in September to refurbish homes in often blighted areas.

The Department for Communities and Local Government has said that the homes should be ready to live in within three years.

REFERENCE: *GOV.UK, 'Funding boost will help stop the rot' of empty homes, 26/11/2012, The Rt Hon Don Foster MP. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/funding-boost-will-help-stop-the-rot-of-empty-homes?utm_medium=email&utm_source=Chartered+Institute+of+Housing&utm_campaign=1793487_News+and+views+28+November+2012&dm_i=YRX,12FV3,7E6H64,3B4UG,1.*

RURAL HEALTH NETWORK LAUNCHED

Health professionals and well-known academics met in Nottingham for the launch of the new Rural Health Network.

The Health Network will enable health professionals to effectively share best practice, innovation, learning and excellence in respect of rural health services and health commissioning countryside, involving every sector supporting health. The idea developed as a result of discussions between the Rural Services Network, Nottinghamshire Healthcare and the Institute of Rural Health earlier in the year.

The toolkit is available at: <http://www.ruralproofingforhealth.org.uk/>.

REFERENCE: *Rural Services Network – Rurality Media, 'Rural Health Network Launched', 02/12/2012. Available at: <http://www.rsnonline.org.uk/services/rural-health-network-launched>.*

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TELL US WHAT YOU THINK



Great Blakenham, Orbit Housing Association,
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THIS NEWSLETTER PROVIDES A MONTHLY ROUNDUP OF LOCAL HOUSING NEWS FOR THE BABERGH AND MID SUFFOLK DISTRICTS, AS WELL AS HEADLINE NATIONAL HOUSING NEWS.

IF YOU HAVE ANY SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT, OR IF YOU HAVE ANY IDEAS FOR FUTURE NEWS ARTICLES, PLEASE CONTACT US USING THE DETAILS TO THE LEFT.