

linkup

Thames Valley Housing Residents' Magazine

Winter 2011



Looking ahead

Improving our service **p3**

Financial advice on the farm **p4**

Beating the budget **p7**

Resolutions competition **p14**

welcome...

to the winter 2011 edition of Link Up.

Hopefully you enjoyed the festive period, and 2011 is off to a good start!

With the cold weather setting in, it's really important for us to keep warm, stay healthy and make the best use of the heating at home, read our tips on page 9.

As a result of the Government spending review and the VAT rise, it has never been so important to watch the pennies. Page 7 has tips for beating the budget cuts.

In February we will be moving over to a new computer system which will help improve the service we provide to you, see page 3 for details.

We hope you enjoy this edition!

Link Up is created by:



Stephanie Sheen

Link Up lead writer and producer
Communications Co-ordinator
stephanie_sheen@tvha.co.uk



Alex Noonoo

Link Up Editor
PR and Marketing Manager
alex_noonoo@tvha.co.uk



Rosalind Grozier

Link Up contributor
Communications Officer
Rosalind_Grozier@tvha.co.uk



Contents

	PAGE
Financial advice 'on the farm'	4
Benefits changes	5
Money savings	7
2011 Census	8
Keeping warm this winter	9
Your feedback on Link Up	10
Meet our resident author	11
Tackling ASB	12
Resident Auditors' update	13
New year resolutions	14

Read Link Up online

Please help the environment by receiving Link Up by email. Sign up by emailing link_up@tvha.co.uk

Please provide your name and full postal address.

Improving our service

On Tuesday 8th February, we are upgrading our computer systems. This will mean transferring all the information we hold about you and our homes over to a new housing management system.

Throughout December and January, all staff received lots of training to use this new system.

Future benefits will include:

- Automation of some of our administration, meaning we can spend more time talking to you and resolving your queries.
- Access to a vast amount of information from across the organisation, meaning we should be able to respond to queries a lot more quickly.
- Adding more features to our website so you can process more enquiries on-line.
- Quicker processing of your enquiries when you call in by linking our telephones to the new systems.

The new system will bring many benefits to our service over the coming months and years.

But, we may experience a few glitches as we get used to using the new system, the key dates for you to be aware of are:

Transfer between old and new system, Friday 4th - Monday 7th February:

- Customer Service Centre remains open, but our service will be limited. This is because we will not have access to historical records while information is being moved from the old to the new system.

Computer system goes live, Tuesday 8th February:

- Customer Service Centre open, and will offer a full service, but it may take us a little longer than usual to process your enquiries whilst staff put their training into practice.



During this period, we recommend that you contact us early in the week beginning 31st January or later during the week beginning 7th February. We will be able to offer you a better service on these days than if you contact us on either Friday 4th or Monday 7th February.

Residents get financial advice 'down on the farm'

Sheep, goats, pigs and hamsters were the stars of a financial inclusion day organised for residents in Rushmoor, which took place towards the end of last year in Farnborough.



Tony Brandon, TVH Revenues Officer, explains, "The purpose of the day was to raise awareness of how to manage money and avoid getting into debt, but we wanted people to feel they could bring their families, so we decided to include a petting farm.

"Lots of residents attended with their children, and had the opportunity to talk to representatives from the Job Centre, the Citizens Advice Bureaux (CAB) and from Credit Unions.

"Our Revenues Officers were also there. If residents are struggling, they should contact us. We don't judge, we can provide a lot of advice, and if the resident owes us rent, we'll set up a payment plan they can afford."

The CAB can provide a lot of advice about what someone's rights are if they are in debt and will also point people to free debt advice charities that they can trust.



The stars of the day were the animals from the petting farm. Many of the children who attended had never seen a farm animal up close, and were delighted to be able to handle and touch them.

There were also competitions with prizes donated from our partner Mears, who provide our reactive repairs. Farnborough FC donated 50 family tickets as well as medals, prizes and a day out at the stadium.



Benefit changes



Last October, the Government proposed several cuts to the welfare system. If you receive Housing Benefit, this could affect you.

Non-dependant deductions - from April 2011:

A non-dependant is someone living in your home such as an adult son or daughter, relative or friend. There will be higher levels of deductions for non-dependants in income-related benefits like Housing and Council tax.

This means that if you have non-dependant person/s living with you, you may receive lower benefit payments. It is important that you discuss this with your non-dependants to ensure that they are aware of the need to increase their contributions.

Full Housing Benefit time limit for people on Jobseeker's Allowance - from April 2013:

Working age claimants who have been in receipt of Jobseeker's Allowance for 12 months or longer may have their Housing Benefit reduced by 10%.

If you are claiming other benefits such as Incapacity Benefit, Income Support or Carer's Allowance, you may be transferred onto either Jobseeker's Allowance or Employment Support Allowance.

Size restrictions for social rented properties - from April 2013:

Housing Benefit may be limited for working age tenants so that it only covers the property size that is deemed necessary for the household. If you are living in a home larger than your household, housing benefits may be cut.

£500 per week limit on working age benefits and tax credits entitlements - from April 2013:

A cap of £500 per week for families may be placed on working age benefits and tax credit entitlements, with any excess being taken off Housing Benefit.

These are proposals and may change, but we think it is important to let you know about them. If any of the above changes and proposals will affect you, it is important you contact the Housing Benefit department at your local authority for further advice and information.

Rent and service charge details to arrive early!



We used to send your annual rent and service charge details for the new financial year (1st April - 31st March) in February.

This left you with a month to make arrangements to change your standing order or to prepare to make the revised payment.

In order to give you more time to make these changes, we are sending the demands out in January. If you have any queries relating to the statement, and want to discuss these with a member of staff, we have late night opening hours during January. Exact dates and times will be available on our website.



Can't pay your rent?

Don't ignore it – get in touch now!

If you are having difficulty paying your rent, get in touch with us as soon as possible so we can help you. If you don't, it could ultimately lead to the loss of your home.

We will make an agreement with you to pay off an affordable amount of your arrears when you pay your rent. We can also refer you to a debt advisor or the Citizens Advice Bureau as a priority client.

Phone the Customer Service Centre on 0800 358 7767 to request our Debt Advice leaflet or to speak with a member of staff about your situation.

Rent payments via Girobank

From 1st March this year, you will no longer be able to pay your rent by Girobank. If you have Girobank slips and are using them to pay your rent, please contact our Customer Service Centre (CSC) before 1st March.

Our CSC officers will be able to advise you about the range of other ways to pay your rent. If you wish, they can arrange to send you a Rent Payment card, which can be used to pay your rent at the Post Office and other outlets displaying the Paypoint sign.

Make your money go further



1 Switch to save

Paying too much for gas and electricity?

Shopping around to make sure you are getting the best deal on your gas and electricity bills means you could save yourself up to £350 a year.

The easiest way to find who's cheapest is to use a comparison site, where you input where you live and as much information as possible about your energy bills, and it tells you who's cheapest. If you don't have your bills handy, it'll estimate the best deal.

Energy helpline: www.energyhelpline.com
0800 074 0745

2 Shopping

Where you choose to buy your food can make a big difference to your pocket. Supermarkets are usually cheaper than your local corner shop, but fruit and vegetable stalls are cheaper still.

Trying the supermarket own brand can save you

around 15% on your food bills a year – so it's worth giving this a go.

3 Benefits check up

Check that you are getting all the benefits you are entitled to.

Visit www.turn2us.org.uk where you'll be able to find your local advisor.

4 Make a budget

If you struggle to make ends meet, a budget can help you.

Start by listing all the money you have coming in each month (wages/benefits etc) against all the money you spend (on rent, bills and food.) The difference between the two amounts will show you how much you are overspending.

This will give you a chance to think about where you can cut back – and put the tips above into practice.

VAT increase

Value Added Tax (VAT) is a tax you pay when you buy goods and services. If you have to pay VAT on something, it will normally be included in the price you see.

In the UK there are three rates of tax.

1 Standard rate

The standard rate of VAT has risen from 17.5% to 20%.

Items like alcohol, snacks and take-aways will have the

standard rate of VAT added to the price.

2 Reduced rate

In some cases, for example children's car seats and gas and electricity for your home, you pay a reduced rate of 5%.

3 Zero rate

There are some goods on which you don't pay any VAT, like:

- fresh food items
- books, newspapers and magazines

- children's clothes
- some goods provided in special circumstances - for example, equipment for disabled people

You are most likely to notice the VAT increase on your weekly shopping – so remember that eating fresh is cheaper... there is no VAT on fresh fruit, vegetables, fresh meat or fish – but there is on ready meals and snacks like crisps etc. Eating healthily really does pay!

The 2011 Census is coming ...

The Census takes place on 27 March 2011. It's your chance to help shape tomorrow for your family and your community.

What is the Census?

The Census collects information about the population every ten years. Taking part means that services in your community can be planned and funded for the future. Each household will receive a questionnaire, which contains straightforward questions about the people who live there.

Why should I take part?

The results of the 2011 Census directly affect you, your family and your community. The information gathered will be used to plan:

- school facilities for children now and in the future
- housing for families
- public transport that helps people to get to work
- health services that everyone can access

What do I need to do?

There will be two ways to complete your questionnaire:

- 1 online at www.census.gov.uk
- 2 using the questionnaire, which can be returned in the supplied, pre-paid envelope

To find out more about how to take part in the Census visit www.census.gov.uk

Do I have to take part?

The Census is compulsory, and if you don't take part you could be fined up to £1,000.



Is your home too big?



We want to help you to live in a home which suits your needs best. If you are a secure or assured tenant living in a home that you feel is too big for you, we can help you move to a smaller property.

This help could be through a cash payment* or a support process through which we help you every step of the move.

The benefits

By moving to a smaller property, you are likely to save money on your rent, council tax, gas and electricity bills as they are dependent on your property size.

The increase in fuel bills and recently announced changes to the benefit systems will have an impact on many households. It could leave many with even higher costs to pay if they remain in a home that is too big for them.

Interested?

If you are interested in taking up a cash offer or receiving close support with your move, please contact our Customer Service Centre on 0800 358 7767.

*Offer subject to resources available at the time.

Keeping warm this winter



Keeping warm over the winter months can help prevent colds, flu or more serious health problems like pneumonia.

There are some simple things you can do to keep warm, stay healthy and make the best use of your heating at home.

Heating your home

- Set your thermostat at around 21°C (70°F)
- If you can't heat all your rooms, make sure you keep your living room warm throughout the day and heat your bedroom before going to bed
- Set the timer on your heating to come on before you get up and switch off when you go to bed
- In very cold weather set the heating to come on earlier, rather than turn the thermostat up, so you won't be cold while you wait for

your home to heat up

- Draw curtains over windows at night to provide insulation for the room
- Keep outside doors shut and block up obvious draughts (including the letterbox)
- Move furniture away from radiators and heaters to allow heat to circulate around the room
- Open internal doors of any rooms which get more sun than others and let the warm air travel around your home

Wear something warm

You can help keep warm by:

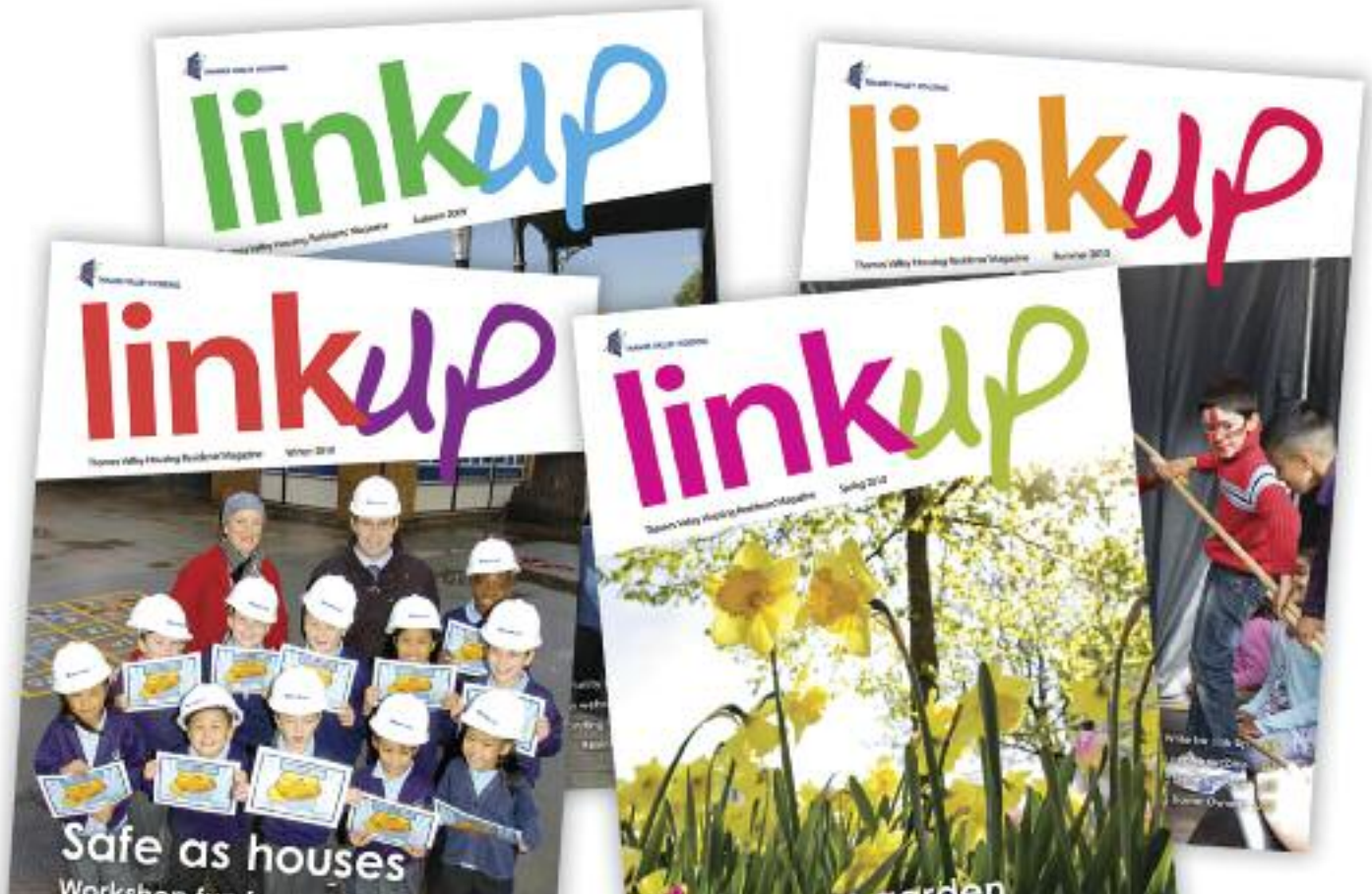
- Wearing plenty of thin layers, rather than one thick one
- Putting on a coat, hat, scarf, gloves and warm shoes or boots when you go outside
- Wearing clothes made of wool, cotton, or fleecy synthetic fibres

- Wearing bed socks, thermal underwear and a nightcap or headscarf at night

Worried about your bills?

Follow these simple steps to help reduce bills:

- Turn radiators down in rooms which you only use occasionally
- Switch your lights off when you're not using them
- Turn appliances like TVs and phone chargers off at the wall rather than leaving them on standby when they're not being used
- Replace normal light bulbs with energy efficient bulbs which use 1/5 of the electricity. They may cost a little more, but they soon pay for themselves
- Regularly defrost your freezer to make sure it's operating at full efficiency



Link Up review

In the last edition we told you about the Link Up review and we asked for your suggestions on how we could improve it.

We promised to publish your suggestions alongside the outcomes of the review meeting we held with residents in September.

Here's what you said you'd like to see:

- More images
- Articles to be grouped by topic
- Less corporate writing style
- Stories written by residents
- Signposting to other external services and tips

What we're unable to do

Another request was for more 'local' information. Providing useful local information for all our

residents is very difficult. We have homes in over 40 local authorities, all of which provide information through their websites and magazines.

Rather than replicate what your local council already produces, we will no longer be providing every area with neighbourhood newsletters. Instead we will be using our website to publicise details of local events and activities that we are running.

If you do not have access to the internet you can contact the Customer Service Centre on 0800 358 7767 to request this information.

What happens next?

These improvements will be put in place in the next edition of Link Up – so if your spring magazine is a little late, please bear with us – we are working hard to give you a better residents' magazine!

Competition winner

Thank you to everyone who posted and emailed us their suggestions to improve Link Up.

Entries went into a prize draw to win £50 of Love2Shop vouchers.

Congratulations to Philip and Carol Burrow from Crowthorne, whose suggestion was first out of the hat.

Resident's book is the cat's whiskers!



Julia Rompe, a TVH resident living in South West London, has become a published author, thanks to her cat, Ben, who disappeared in September 2009 and turned up again for Christmas.

Julia has a 12 year old son, George, and Ben is responsible for helping him come out of his shell. She says, "I have always kept a diary of our life together so that if anything happened to me, my son would have the diary to look back on. He has autism, and for a long time, didn't communicate or interact well with people at all."

One day a cat turned up on Julia's doorstep and though she didn't really want a pet, she let him stay.

"The most amazing thing happened. My son started to interact with Ben and soon became very attached to him. This really helped him learn to communicate with others and form relationships with them. Then out the blue, Ben disappeared. My son was heart broken, and retreated back into himself. I felt as if I lost my son as well. So, I decided I was going to search for Ben and bring him back.

"It was quite an adventure - we put leaflets up in a ten mile radius around where I live, however he was actually found, believe it or not, in Brighton. Thankfully, just before that Christmas he came back to us, and George soon recovered from his temporary set back."

Julia decided to write a book about Ben after a friend read her diary and suggested she should.

"I can't believe that I am a published author. I've never done anything like this before, and didn't think I could. It's wonderful for me, but much more important is that it will bring in money for George's School, the Marjory Kinnon School, which is for children with learning difficulties. I do a lot of work for charity, especially charities for children with learning difficulties and charities for animals, and they will all benefit from my book."

A Friend Like Ben: The Cat That Came Home For Christmas, by Julia Rompe, published 2010, HarperCollins.

Win!

We have one signed copy of *A Friend Like Ben*. If you answer the following question correctly, your entry will be placed into a hat and the first name out will win the book.

What is the name of the Egyptian cat-Goddess?

- A Atum**
- B Bastet**
- C Amenhotep**

Send your answer to Stephanie Sheen, Communications Officer at link_up@tvha.co.uk or post your answer to her (use the freepost address on the back page).

Tackling Anti Social Behaviour

Anti Social Behaviour (ASB) can have a devastating effect on its victims and the wider community. We work closely with the local police and council to help create safer, more cohesive neighbourhoods, but we need your help to do this.

Your statements and evidence allow us to deal with ASB firmly, taking perpetrators to court for eviction if required. Dealing with ASB can often be a lengthy, and sometimes costly, process. Despite this we are committed to taking action and resolving all ASB cases which you report to us.

Eviction time line

The following is an example of a real ASB case which we recently brought to a conclusion. In total, the case cost us £15,243 in legal fees and court costs. It shows the efforts we take to fully deal with ASB and ensure our neighbourhoods remain safe.

2003

- Ms M moves into one of our 3-bed houses with her partner and young son.

2006

- Neighbours report that Ms M is dealing Class A drugs from the home.
- Our Neighbourhood officers contact the community safety partnership and social services. Ms M is visited about her behaviour but denies everything.
- The case is taken to the community action group (neighbourhood officers, police, local authority community safety team and support workers).
- It's decided that with the help of the police, we will continue to monitor the nuisance and take further action if the situation does not improve.



2007

- Ms M's neighbours make further allegations of drug dealing.
- The home is raided by the Special Branch of the Metropolitan Police.
- Ms M serves a spell in prison.

2008

- We apply to the court for a possession order to evict Ms M.
- The judge grants a Suspended Possession Order. This means Ms M can continue to live in the property provided she does not do anything else to breach her tenancy conditions.

2010

- Ms M is again arrested for possession of drugs. Further reports of disturbance are made by neighbours.
- We again apply for a court hearing. Ms M hands in her keys and leaves the property.

Reporting ASB

You can provide details of any anti social behaviour you witness or experience by calling our Customer Service Centre on 0800 358 7767.

If you need to report an incident outside of office hours please call 0800 0232 087*.

***Please note:** This is not an emergency number. In an emergency, you should always call 999.



Resident Auditors' update

The resident auditors have been very busy since my last update, carrying out doorstep surveys about complaints and customer care to ensure that we get the views of as many residents as possible.

Your comments will form part of our recommendations which will be presented to TVH Management in March.

Thank you to all those residents who have participated and provided us with much needed feedback.

A separate team within the auditors' group has also been closely monitoring and testing the progress that has been made by TVH in achieving the recommendations from our previous reports on repairs, Anti Social Behaviour and Service Charges.

We are very pleased with the progress being made and the benefits that should already be experienced by residents.

Some of the improvements made to the repairs service include:

- Thursday evening appointments with Mears
- Live calling of residents when repairs are taking place

- Introduction of the text message appointment reminders
- Regular updating of residents' contact information to ensure that TVH is able to contact you when necessary

We are always looking for more residents to be involved. If you would like to help us make a difference to the services we receive, then contact Stephen Beckett-Doyle on 020 8607 0690 for an informal chat.

Hoping you all had a great Christmas.

Steve McAllister, Chair
Thames Valley Resident Auditors

Help us improve the cleaning and gardening service

In the autumn edition, we told you about our review of the cleaning and grounds contract, which is currently held by Quadron. Since then we have held a resident workshop to further clarify your views on the quality of work you would like to see carried out on your estates.

We will be inviting a number of companies to bid to deliver the new cleaning and grounds services, which will be in place by the end of 2011.

Before this, we are updating estate specifications so they are clearer and reflect individual estates – and we need your help

to make sure we are putting in place a better service that meets your needs.

If you want to be involved in helping us to select the new service provider, please get in touch with Fran Moynihan on 020 8607 0784 or Frances_Moynihan@tvha.co.uk

New year resolutions

See if you can find the ten common New Year's Resolutions hidden below.

Send us your completed word search (to the freepost address on the back of Link Up) by Friday 18th February to be in with the chance of winning £20 of love2shop vouchers.

10 Resolutions to find:

- | | |
|--------------|----------------|
| 1 enjoy life | 2 find love |
| 3 get fit | 4 help others |
| 5 hobby | 6 lose weight |
| 7 new job | 8 quit smoking |
| 9 travel | 10 family time |



There are four prizes up for grabs; all correct entries will be placed into a hat and the first four drawn out will win.

Good luck!

N	F	I	N	D	L	O	V	E	L	I	H	N
Q	U	I	T	S	M	O	K	I	N	G	Q	E
Z	E	V	P	R	G	Z	Y	J	R	A	S	M
O	C	F	G	E	B	S	S	Y	H	G	K	I
E	K	M	W	G	R	T	R	R	B	E	C	T
N	T	H	G	I	E	W	E	S	O	L	K	Y
J	R	O	G	F	G	O	H	S	J	X	K	L
O	N	S	X	J	W	H	T	R	W	B	G	I
Y	T	R	A	V	E	L	O	W	E	R	E	M
L	M	G	X	K	W	H	P	B	N	M	T	A
I	Y	F	I	S	T	B	L	A	B	A	F	F
F	R	E	R	A	K	K	E	X	J	Y	I	I
E	Y	P	H	Y	P	Q	H	F	X	L	T	C



Prize winners

Every time you report an internal or communal repair, we post an order confirmation letter and satisfaction survey to you.

Each month the names of people who returned the survey go into a hat with the first out winning £30 of Love2Shop vouchers.

Congratulations to our recent winners:

June - Mrs Edwards, Farnham

July - Mr Apeadu-Bosompra, Reading

August - Mr and Mrs Bright, Reading

September - Miss Lambeth, Hounslow

October - Mr and Mrs Knight, Guildford

November - Miss Diaz, Kew

Changes to social housing on the way

A message from our director

Winter seems to have come early this year, and with all the talk of cuts and austerity, it does begin to feel like the balmy days of summer were a lifetime ago.

You may have heard about all the proposed changes to social housing, and you would be forgiven for thinking that things are about to get a lot tougher. However, we do want to offer you some reassurance, and we have produced a fact sheet covering how these changes may affect you. You can find it on our website, or call the Customer Service Centre to request a copy through the post. I hope the fact sheet will help put your minds at rest, as well as giving you a better feel for how you might be affected.

The good news is that if you are already a tenant in social housing your tenancy won't change, meaning that you will have the same security of tenure that you have now. Your rent will also be set using the same formula which we use now.

Existing leaseholders and shared owners are not affected by the changes either. However, people claiming housing benefit may experience changes which may mean that their household income goes down. Most of these changes won't happen until 2013 so you have some time to prepare yourself. If you have someone in your household who is a non-dependant, the deductions from your housing benefit will be going up in April, so watch out for that one.

Thames Valley is here to help – we want to keep you in your homes and make sure that you get the best advice. So have a look at our fact sheet, and contact us if you need to – we will help as much as we can.

John Baldwin

Housing and Neighbourhood Services Director



Brian Hutchings

We're sad to report that Brian Hutchings sadly passed away in December.

Brian had been a TVH resident since 1995, and devoted his years with us taking part in a number of resident initiatives. He was a Resident Estate Inspector, took part in the Service Quality Improvement Groups and was a member of the former Residents' Consultative Committee. Brian also provided invaluable help in arranging our annual resident events.

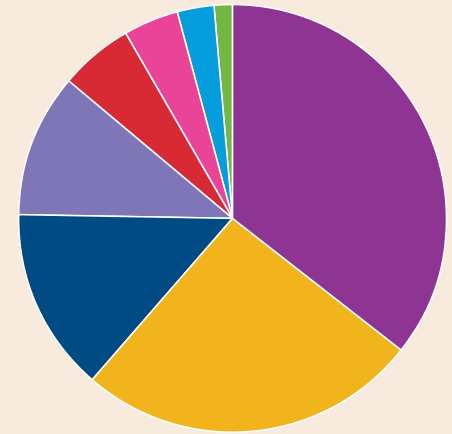
Brian is pictured here (far right) at the opening of our St Andrew's development in Surbiton, which he attended as part of his work on our Residents' Design Group just a few days before his death.

Brian was popular among residents and staff alike and will be very sadly missed.



Complaints performance

July to September 2010



New complaints received this quarter

Day to Day maintenance	26
Money Matters	19
Defects	10
Estate Services	8
General Service	4
Management Services	3
Lettings & Allocations	2
Planned/Cyclical maintenance	1
Grand Total	73

Complaints completed this quarter

Average length of time to complete: 8.63 days

Number of complaints completed with outcomes:

Fully upheld	
- with compensation	3
Fully upheld	
- without compensation	12
Partially upheld	
- with compensation	3
Partially upheld	
- without compensation	16
Not upheld	15
Pending	15
Total	65

