

Opening *doors* to better homes



Issue 13 • Spring 2009

Spring into action

How your feedback drives our work



Your feedback
counts
p4



Getting more
for our money
p8



Going the
extra mile
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spring edition of
Opening Doors
to Better Homes.



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A big welcome is extended to our new customers from the Western Downs estate, whose homes joined SARH on 6 April 2009.

We offer the same commitments to both our new and existing customers and look forward to having you with us.

An enormous amount has happened since the last edition and we have a very full year ahead. It always feels so much more positive when we hit spring.

We want to understand more about how we can help you this year, and what services you would value most from us.

To do this, we will soon be asking customers what we can do to make things better in your home and the area you live in.

SARH is now three years old. We have invested more than £32 million in your homes and we have a lot more to do.

We are now completing improvements at Doxey House; we have started our first Extracare conversion for high-quality housing for older

customers at Jubilee Court; and will soon commence conversion and improvement works at Oxleathers Court.

This is the next phase of our investment in housing for older people.

We are very concerned about this year's rent increase. As we are not subsidised at all, we have to increase our rents in accordance with government guidelines.

But we're totally committed to providing extra - and even better - services for your money. We are looking at ways to provide extra support for customers with housing and financial problems - for example, through credit unions, training and work opportunities and more choice in housing.

As Stafford's biggest social landlord, we intend to help make the borough a place people want to live and work. Let us know what we can do to help you by contacting us on 0800 111 4554.

Karen Armitage
Chief Executive

Homesfirst for you

In autumn 2009, we're launching a brand new choice based lettings service to help people find a new home.

For the last six months, we've been consulting customers and other local organisations about how our housing allocations system works. Our new allocations policy will launch in autumn 2009. Details will be available in the summer, and we'll keep you informed through this magazine.

The new system will make a big difference if you're looking for a move. When Homesfirst launches, you'll be able to view properties online and in a free weekly property sheet. You'll even have the choice to apply online and bid for homes over the internet. At the same time, you'll



still be able to contact us by phone or visit any of our offices. We'll even run a homefinder service for people who can't use the service direct - and you can always contact us if you need any help using the new system.

When homes are let, we will provide feedback on how many people have applied for properties and the successful applicant's position. This will be a much more

open way of letting properties.

We will hold a series of customer events in the summer to show you how the new system works. So keep a lookout on the SARH website and in our Stone and Stafford Shops for more details.

For further advice about Homesfirst, please contact the Housing Choices Team on Freephone 0800 111 4554 or email housingchoices@sarh.co.uk

A question of STATUS

Our latest customer survey took place at the end of 2008. We surveyed every tenant and leaseholder and 2,259 people replied. The results are still being analysed, but here's the news so far.

Customer contact

- 67 per cent of respondents find it easy to get hold of the right person when calling SARH
- 81 per cent think staff are helpful

- 70 per cent said we've helped to deal with problems.

Repairs and maintenance

- 32 per cent said our service has improved, and 46 per cent thought it's around the same
- 88 per cent of people were happy with the attitude of our workers
- 80 per cent of respondents were satisfied with our quality of repairs work.

We've noticed the need to improve our work in a couple of areas:

- Arranging our work better
- Producing clearer information about our major works programme
- Giving out better information on certain services, to reduce customer enquiries.

The survey results will soon be published on our website, www.sarh.co.uk

Your feedback counts

We want to provide an excellent service to all our customers. Your feedback helps us to understand what we do well, and how we can improve.

Whether you visit us, phone us or use our website, please use our 'smiley faces' to say if we got things right.

It's quick and easy to use. Just pick the face that matches your views on the service you received, then tell us why. We review every piece of feedback we receive and act on it as soon as possible.

Sometimes we can make simple changes straight away; at other times, we may have to do quite a bit of work before we can put things right. Your feedback helps us to provide a better service for everyone. The table below shows some examples of how recent customer feedback helped us to improve our service.



HAPPY WITH US



SO-SO



UNHAPPY WITH US

You told us...	What we did
You were waiting too long for us to answer lunchtime calls	Changed Customer Service Centre working patterns to make more staff available during peak periods
You wanted feedback from estate walkabouts in your area	Published feedback from the walkabouts on our website
You wanted baby changing facilities	Provided baby changing facilities at Parker Court



Gas safety: goodbye CORGI

From 1 April 2009, there's a new hallmark for gas safety.

The new Gas Safe register replaces CORGI as the official gas safety body. Only Gas Safe

registered engineers will be allowed to carry out work on gas appliances or installations in your home. All of SARH's gas engineers will be registered with Gas Safe.

If you have any queries or concerns about gas safety, please call us on Freephone 0800 111 4554. We can also advise you when your next annual gas safety check is due.



Local chats shape national conversation

Last issue, we told you how SARH is finding out what customers really want as part of a national campaign being led by the Tenant Services Authority (TSA).

The **National Conversation** is the largest ever consultation with English social housing tenants. The conversation will ensure customers' views shape the development of the TSA's new landlord regulation system.

The first of our **Local Conversation** events took place on 4 February at our Stafford Shop.

We asked customers at the event:

- What they think about SARH
- What services are important
- What services need improving.

Further events were held at the Stone Shop and in Stafford Market Square.

Feedback from all of the events will be sent to the TSA shortly, and used to develop the new national standards.

We will also feedback to our customers through our website and future issues of *Opening doors to better homes*.



Independence days



In November, we reported how fitting aids and adaptations for disabled people in customers' homes is making a big difference to the quality of peoples' lives. Since then, work has kept progressing at a speedy rate.

Over the past five months, we've completed 110 major installations, including level-access showers, over-bath showers, ramps, steps and grab-rails. Added to that, Stafford Borough Council has completed more than 40 adaptations, including stairlifts and room extensions.

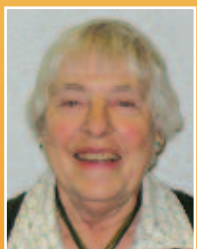
The real sign of success is the feedback we've received from customers. Every single person who has completed a survey after work was done to their home has said they're "very satisfied" with the improvements. That's fantastic news and we want to maintain our great track record in the future.

Dave Wilkins, Stock Investment Support Services Manager for Stafford and Rural Homes, said: "We're delighted to have made such good progress on work that is critical to our customers in real need. I would like to pay tribute to the contractors,

occupational therapists and our own staff who have been working flat out to assess needs, and then carry out work to such a high standard."

If you're having problems getting around your home and want to apply for aids or adaptations, please get in touch. You can phone us with your details on 0800 111 4554 or go to our website at www.sarh.co.uk and download an application form. We can then arrange for an occupational therapist to visit you, assess your needs and help us decide how we can best help you.

Tenant talk - update from the Tenants' and Residents' Federation



The time has come for me to stand down as the Chair of the Tenants and Residents Federation.

I have enjoyed the last 12 months meeting lots of new people and encouraging new customers to become involved in the work of SARH.

It is really important that we get as many new customers involved as possible so that they can have a real influence over the services they receive. It would be great to see some of our new customers from Western Downs getting involved too.

The Community Resource Centre at 56 Grey Friars, Stafford is a valuable resource

for the community and I would urge you to call in and see what they have to offer.

I wish everyone real luck and energy for the future.

Peggy Sparrow
Chair of the Tenants and Residents Federation

Positive about improvements

When you complain to us, we work hard to listen, improve things and make a positive difference.

Last year, we streamlined our complaints system to make it

easier for you to report problems to us. As a result, we received 544 complaints from July to December 2008. We replied to 495 of those complaints (91 per cent) within our target time of five

working days.

Here are some examples of changes we have made as a result of the complaints we have received.

Customers said...	What we did...
We'd missed an appointment	Launched a new system to monitor our team's workload more closely, track appointments and rearrange visits in emergencies
Repeat visits were needed for repairs because the job wasn't done right first time	Gave repairs 'diagnosis' training to our Customer Service Centre staff and operatives
We could handle enquiries about vacating homes after a death better	Improved our customer care and contact arrangements where a customer has died
We could improve the property reports sent out after a stock condition survey	Revised our report format to tell you what work is being done, rather than information about key components
We could improve the information provided in our job adverts and job packs	Provided clearer information about the qualifications and experience needed to do different jobs
Some of our team members could improve their work and style	Set appraisal targets and one-to-one reviews for staff and managers

ABC guide to tackling nuisance behaviour

We've joined forces with Staffordshire Police to tackle youth nuisance across the Stafford Borough.

Acceptable Behaviour Contracts, or ABCs for short, are voluntary contracts signed by individuals whose bad behaviour is affecting the community.

The contracts last for six months and are monitored closely by the Police and our Neighbourhood

Services Officers. If someone breaks the rules of their ABC and keeps causing a nuisance, they could be served with an Anti-Social Behaviour Order.

ABCs are intended to prevent nuisance, by helping young people understand how their behaviour affects other people. We aim to help these individuals change their behaviour, so that other people don't have to suffer nuisance in future.



If you would like more information about Acceptable Behaviour Contracts, please contact your Neighbourhood Services Officer on 0800 111 4554.

Credit union open for business

If you've been thinking about saving some cash for a rainy day, the new Staffordshire Credit Union could be just what you're looking for.

The credit union launched in February 2009 and is now accepting applications from anyone who lives, works or studies in Staffordshire. You can save up to £10,000 through the credit union. There's even a chance you could gain a return on your investment, in the form of a dividend.

A credit union is a not-for-profit financial institution which is supported by its members as a co-operative. The union can both grant loans and manage savings on its members' behalf. It may only use money from members' deposits to finance loans to other members.

The credit union's Chief Executive, Kevin Waters, said: "The Staffordshire Credit Union will provide ordinary people in this area with the opportunity to access a different type of financial service; one that helps those who may have previously been excluded from mainstream financial markets because they are seen as too much of a risk."

The new credit union, a not-for-profit organisation, is approved by the Financial Services Authority (FSA). SARH has pledged £15,000 over three years to support the credit union. Other local councils and housing associations are also giving support.

It's hoped that the Staffordshire Credit Union will become the first of its kind in the UK to go completely cashless - with

deposits being made by payroll deductions, standing orders, direct debits, Pay Point, Post Offices and online banking. A debit card, which you can top-up at the credit union office from members savings, is also planned for the future. This will give members without a bank account the chance to buy goods from shops and supermarkets, and may even include cashback facilities.

If you'd like to join the credit union, you can - just call into our head office or one of our shops. You'll need to provide two pieces of evidence (one to prove your identity, the other confirming where you live). Or you can phone the credit union direct on 0845 224 1215, email info@staffscu.co.uk or visit www.staffscu.co.uk

Getting more for our money

Each year, we ask customers and community groups for suggestions on improvements that would make a difference to local neighbourhoods.

By working with you, our customer groups and suppliers, we can improve local areas, promote community spirit and achieve better living standards.

Following a review of our suppliers, SARH has negotiated some extra discounts on furniture and curtains. With the savings made, we have been able to provide:

- Decoration and carpets to the entrance at Longhope Drive, Stone
- Additional decoration and carpets to the entrance corridor at Crispin Close

- Additional fence and gates at Barnes Road drying area.

So not only have we been able to get better value for money, some customers are seeing the difference in their homes and surrounding areas.



Mortgage rescue - a remedy

If you know someone who's having problems paying their mortgage, the Government's new Mortgage Rescue Scheme may be a welcome solution.

This scheme helps people at risk of homelessness because they're struggling with mortgage repayments. Stafford Borough Council is working with the Citizens' Advice Bureau, Mercian Housing Association and mortgage lenders to provide support. There are two options:

- Applicants sell a share of their home to the housing association. This means they receive a share in your property's equity. Mortgage payments will drop, making it easier to manage outgoings

- An owner sells their home to the housing association outright, but stays on as a tenant.

Who can apply?

To qualify, households must include someone in priority need. This could be a expectant mother, family with dependent children, or someone vulnerable due to old age or disability.

The following rules also apply:

- All owners of the property must agree to being considered for the scheme
- There must be enough equity to pay off any outstanding debts

- The property must be suitable for the household's needs (for example, not overcrowded)

- The applicant must receive debt counselling and advice and agree arrangements to repay their debts

- The family home should be worth £130,000 or less (and the only property owned by the applicant)

- Applicant households must have a total annual income of £60,000 or less.

For more information, please contact our Benefit Liaison Officer Annette Hopkins on 0800 111 4554. Annette can offer advice and pass applicants' details on to Stafford Borough Council.

Going the extra mile

Has anyone at SARH gone above and beyond the call of duty for you, or someone that you know?

We have set up a special award for members of staff who have gone the extra mile, and we would like you to tell us who deserves to win.

The Aspiring for Excellence staff recognition scheme rewards staff who have:

- Conducted excellent work
- Gone beyond the normal line of duty

- Gone the extra mile
- Been creative in finding solutions
- Made change happen
- Been efficient
- Worked in partnership
- Been a good ambassador for SARH.

A panel of customers and staff will choose a winner each month, to reflect the people making the biggest difference to our work. Some recent award winners - Keith Rogers,



Paul Sun and Sandra Shipperley - are pictured above.

If you would like to nominate someone for an award, please phone us on 0800 111 4554, or download a nomination form from our website www.sarh.co.uk Or you can collect a form from one of our offices.

Housing surgeries in good shape



Keeping in touch

Our Neighbourhood Services Team wants to keep in touch, by visiting you at home every now and again.

We aim to visit all of our customers over the next five years. We'd like to introduce ourselves if we haven't met already, and make sure your contact details and household information are up-to-date. Plus, we can give you advice and guidance about any concerns you may have. We will also tell you about SARH services that you may not be aware of and provide information about partners that work with us that may be of interest to you.

You'll receive a letter from your Neighbourhood Services Officer at some point (if you haven't already), confirming the dates they would like to visit you.

If, in the meantime, you would like more information about these visits, please contact your Neighbourhood Services Team on 0800 111 4554.

If you have a housing problem that you want to discuss, come along to one of our monthly advice surgeries for help and advice.

The surgeries cover all sorts of things, including:

- Nuisance and anti-social behaviour
- Tenancy support
- Estate management queries
- Or just a chat about housing generally!

Surgery dates and times

Heather Smith, Neighbourhood Services Officer

is available at our Stone Shop on the first Tuesday of every month.

Date of next surgery

Tuesday, 5 May 2009 at 1.30pm-4.30pm

Fiona Morris, Neighbourhood Services Officer

is available at our Stafford Shop in Greyfriars all day Friday.

Debbie Williams, Neighbourhood Services Officer

is available at the Signpost Centre on Highfields Estate every Wednesday morning, from 10.00am until 12.00noon.

Julia Tompson, Neighbourhood Services Officer

is available at Silkmore Primary School, Silkmore on the first Wednesday of every month.

Date of next surgery

Wednesday, 6 May 2009 at 1.30pm-3.00pm

For more information about our housing surgeries, please contact your Neighbourhood Services Team on 0800 111 4554.

Going walkabout

Our regular estate walkabouts give you a chance to tell our team what's happening in your area. Working together, we can make your neighbourhood a better place to live.

Details of forthcoming walkabouts are listed below. If you'd like to take part, just turn up on the day.



Stone and rural areas

Area	Meeting point	Date and time
Barlaston	Shop on Ivyhouse Drive	30 April 2009, 10.00am
Priory Estate	Corner of Sutherland Road	25 June 2009, 4.00pm
Coppice Estate	Corner of Coppice Gardens	3 July 2009, 2.00pm

North End/town centre

Area	Meeting point	Date and time
Littleworth	Pennycrofts Court Car Park	28 April 2009, 9:30am
Tillington	Gough Close Car Park	23 June 2009, 4.00pm

Highfields

Area	Meeting point	Date and time
Highfields Estate	Corner of Coleridge Drive and West Way	7 May 2009, 10.00am
Highfields Estate	Corner of Lea Crescent	14 May 2009, 10.00am
Highfields Estate	Alder Grove	9 July 2009, 4.00pm

Rickerscote and Silkmore

Area	Meeting point	Date and time
Burton Manor	Burton Square	11 June 2009, 4.00pm

If you would like further information or updates from previous walkabouts, please contact your Neighbourhood Services Team 0800 111 4554.



Coffee break corner

Words to find:

- | | | | |
|-----------|-------|----------|-------|
| Snowdrop | | Freesia | |
| Hyacinith | | Crocus | |
| Iris | | Tulip | |
| Daffodil | | Cyclamen | |

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

Word search

All the words in the list on the right are hidden somewhere in the wordsearch grid.

Read up, down, front, back and diagonally to find them. This one's just for fun!

Quick quiz

**WIN
£25**

One lucky winner will win £25 worth of shopping vouchers. For your chance to bag the prize, just fill in the form opposite and send it back to our head office. Or you can email your answers and contact details to elaine.purshouse@sarh.co.uk if you prefer.

The winner of the last edition was Mrs Fernyhough from Milwich.

Please return this form to Elaine Purshouse, Stafford and Rural Homes, The Rurals, 1 Parker Court, Dyson Way, Stafford ST18 0WP.

Question 1 - Who is the patron saint of England?

.....

Question 2 - Who won the FA Cup final in 1979?

.....

Question 3 - What type of dancing traditionally takes place on May Day?

.....

Name:

.....

Address:

.....

.....

Telephone:

.....

Email:.....

Closing date, 29 May 2009



Opening doors is produced by Stafford and Rural Homes, The Rurals, 1 Parker Court, Dyson Way, Stafford ST18 0WP.

T: 0800 111 4554

www.sarh.co.uk

If you need this document in large print or another format, please contact our customer services team on 0800 111 4554