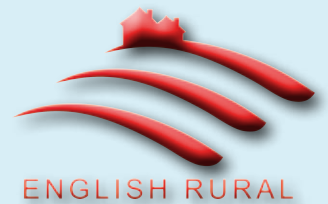


# THE Bulletin



Residents' Newsletter from English Rural Housing Association

Winter 2010



**Above:** Wilkinson Close, Charing - English Rural's first opening in the snow! Thank you to everyone who braved the weather, including the Mayor of Ashford and several officers from Ashford Borough Council (more on Pages 2/3)

On behalf of everyone at English Rural we would like to wish all residents and partners a very Merry Christmas & a happy and healthy New Year.

## Dreaming of a: *Green Christmas?*

If all this snow's too much for you and you're dreaming of a green Christmas, here's some helpful advice on having an environmentally friendly festive period:

<http://www.wasteonline.org.uk/resources/InformationSheets/ChristmasRecycling.htm>



## AGM 2010:

This year we held our Annual General Meeting at the Clare Foundation in Saunderton, Buckinghamshire. Guest speaker Hugh Coghill from Savills stimulated debate with his presentation on working with rural landowners and English Rural's Chairman, Mike Haslam provided an overview of the past year.



## In this Issue...

Welcome to a busy edition with new homes and news a plenty plus a generous helping of snowy pictures to get you in the Christmas mood! Remember you can send your news, views and story ideas for the next edition to us at: [info@englishrural.org.uk](mailto:info@englishrural.org.uk)

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## Christmas Opening

Our offices will be closed from midday on Friday 24th December 2010 through to 9am on Tuesday 4th January 2011. Repairs should be reported using the out of hours number during this time.



# TWO BECOME ONE:

## *English Rural & Test Valley Rural Housing Associations Unite*

Earlier this year residents were made aware that English Rural and Test Valley Rural Housing Associations were undertaking a 'Transfer of Engagements', which will see Test Valley Rural in Hampshire join with English Rural. All residents have been given the opportunity to comment on the proposal and these comments have now been considered by both of the associations' Boards as part of the decision making process. Of the few comments received, none raised any issues considered to be a barrier to the transfer and were almost entirely supportive of the idea. Residents may be interested to note that the Residents' Panel, established by English Rural earlier in the year, has also been closely involved in the consultation process.

At the same time as consulting with residents, both English Rural and Test Valley Rural have been busy undertaking what is known as 'due diligence'; essentially this means checking the credentials of each other to ensure that they fully understand one another's situation and that the Transfer is in everyone's best interests. This process has also now been completed satisfactorily and both of the associations' Boards have agreed to proceed. From Test Valley's perspective this has also included holding a Special General Meeting (SGM) on 17<sup>th</sup> November where it's general membership agreed the transfer. A further SGM is also planned for 14<sup>th</sup> December.

The final stages will involve English Rural and Test Valley Rural preparing for the actual date of the Transfer and seeking approval from the Tenant Services Authority, who are responsible for regulating both organisations. The target date on which the Transfer will happen has been agreed as the 1<sup>st</sup> April 2011. Very few, if any changes are expected to the way in which residents currently receive services; if any changes do become necessary then we will give you plenty of notice beforehand.

If you are unclear about the Transfer or would like to know more about it then either contact the Secretary of Test Valley Rural, Peter Bird on 01264 324 403 (email [peter.bird@primarybs.co.uk](mailto:peter.bird@primarybs.co.uk)) or English Rural's, Operations Director, Martin Collett on 020 7820 7930 (email [martin.collett@englishrural.org.uk](mailto:martin.collett@englishrural.org.uk)).

### **Doors open at new homes**

The latest development of 10 affordable homes in the Ashford Borough has recently been officially opened at Wilkinson Close, Charing.

The opening ceremony was performed by Rachel Wilkinson who is the widow of Sgt David Wilkinson, after whom the development was named. Sgt Wilkinson, who grew up in the village and married his local sweetheart Rachel, sadly lost his life whilst serving in Afghanistan three years ago.

The homes bring the total provided by English Rural in the Ashford Borough to 128, with a further 22 currently onsite. The longstanding partnership between English Rural, Ashford Borough Council and the local parishes has helped to achieve this success.

### **Development news**

English Rural continues to have a strong pipeline of new developments coming forward and is currently either on site or about to get on site with a further 50 affordable rural homes.

As with all developing associations we will need to continue to find innovative ways of financing our building work as the level of money invested by the Government in affordable homes reduces. To put this in context, the recent Comprehensive Spending Review resulted in around a 60% fall in Government subsidy for developing new affordable homes over the next four year period. However, to help address this reduction, new ways in which housing associations like English Rural can raise finance look likely to be enabled. In anticipation of this we had already started a process of securing a further £13 million in private finance to support our work.



# MONEY *Matters*



**Left & Below:**  
New Homes at Charing see their first snow



**Top Left:**  
12 new homes built at Edwards Drive, Thorrington, Essex



**Centre Left:**  
Cedars View, East Tytherley, Hampshire

**Below:**  
Salway Close, Chew Stoke, Somerset



**Left:**  
Gibbs Field, Leigh, Kent



**Left:**  
A festive-looking Podgers Pitch, Beedon, Berkshire



## Rent and Service Charge Review

All residents will be receiving Notices early in 2011 confirming new rent levels and where payable service charge costs. We continue to review rents as directed by Government and this will result in a range of changes from no increase to around a 5% increase depending on what you currently pay. It is unlikely though that any residents will benefit from decreases as was the case in some circumstances last year, where most rents remained the same or came down slightly. Full details will be provided in due course and if you have any concerns about affording the new rent level then you should contact your dedicated Housing Manager to discuss your circumstances, as it maybe that you are entitled to housing benefit.

Shared owners will also see ground rents reviewed and these are likely to be linked to RPI as in previous years. Full details will be sent along with service charge statements to all households who currently pay a service charge.

## Contents insurance: *Are you covered?*

English Rural takes out buildings insurance on behalf of all its residents and the money for this is either covered through rent payments or charged separately in the case of shared owners. We strongly recommend that all residents take out their own contents insurance, the cost of which can start from a few pounds a month for basic cover. Using price comparison websites is a good way to get competitive cover or you can shop around from high street providers such as banks and large retailers. Some schemes exist specifically for social housing tenants, allowing a pay-as-you-go approach and low levels of cover. We have further details on these types of products which we can provide on request.

Serious damage to personal belongings is something that we all hope will never happen to us, but it can and it does - often unexpectedly and with devastating consequences. Without contents insurance you are not covered for this. Over the past 12 months we've attended a number of serious incidents, including a number of fires, and on more than one occasion residents have not had contents insurance meaning that they have no financial means to replace a lifetime's worth of their belongings.



# Repairs *and* MAINTENANCE

English Rural is currently adding the final tweaks to its Asset Management Strategy. This has been drafted in consultation with residents and aims to plan our approach to investing in maintaining and repairing rented homes in the future. The Strategy will be published on English Rural's website and will also be available on request. Some of the key themes coming out of the Strategy include improving the efficiency of our older homes through upgrading properties to minimise warmth loss and improve heating, including integrating renewable energy technology where possible. Increasing choice available to tenants in the way that repairs and maintenance is provided was also found to be important; along with some key themes such as continued demands for affordable rural homes and a projected increase in the number of older households impacted by disability.

Achieving value for money was also considered important, but not to the detriment of the quality of service provided. English Rural has always had a strong record of employing local contractors to carry out repairs and maintenance and this will continue.

Residents who are having work undertaken during the current year's planned maintenance programme will have had this completed already or by now be aware of when the work is scheduled. This year we have worked with the contractor to extend elements of the service to shared owners, who can take advantage of the external decoration programme and buy this service direct from the contractor if they are decorating the rented homes alongside them. This offer was a direct response to feedback from the Residents' Panel, with the aim of passing on contractor efficiencies to shared owners.

## *Changes to boiler servicing arrangements*

*Residents may have read in the media that Rok, who we employed to carry out boiler servicing and repairs, went into administration in November. The contract with Rok was up for review in February 2011 and preparations had already begun to consider future options, which had included creating a more regional approach to delivering this service in line with the preference put forward by residents. Immediate steps were taken to provide interim cover and by the time this newsletter reaches you new arrangements will be in place to provide the longer term cover.*

## TENANCY *issues*

Whether you rent or part own the property that you live in you will have certain rights and responsibilities and these are explained in either the Tenancy Agreement or Lease which you signed when you moved in. You should keep these documents in a safe place, but make sure that you know what your responsibilities are. For example, if you rent your home did you know that you have the right to carry out certain improvements and be compensated for them if you move? Or that all of the landscaping, including trees, hedging and existing planting incorporated within the boundary of your home is your responsibility to maintain? Many of these issues are also covered in the Tenants Handbook, which we are planning to review and circulate to all households next year. The current version is available on our website or can be requested over the phone.

## “YOUR *Say*”

### RESIDENTS' PANEL:

#### *An update...*

The Residents' Panel was established earlier this year and continues to play a key role within English Rural. Some of the projects which have been heavily influenced by the Panel so far include the development of our 'local offers' to residents and the publication of the Annual Report to Residents circulated in October. The Panel also helps to inform policy and procedures and review the way in which we provide services. Details on the Panel, including information on membership and notes taken at meetings, will shortly be published on our website.

Membership on the Residents Panel continues to consist entirely of English Rural residents and to help address this we are looking to recruit a resident from the Test Valley area to participate. If you're interested in getting involved and helping to shape the services that we provide then contact Martin Collett on 020 7820 7930 to find out more.

# Anti-social Behaviour & Nuisance

Anti-social behaviour and neighbourhood nuisance are nothing new; we each have individual opinions and expectations, which at times are different from those living around us. Most of us are prepared to accept a little inconvenience now and again within reason, but rightly get frustrated when our lives are impacted on a regular basis through inconsiderate actions or behaviour of our neighbours. English Rural has a clear policy on dealing with anti-social behaviour, which has been prepared with input from residents. It defines what we consider to be unacceptable and what actions we will take.

By far the easiest way to deal with the issue is to resolve it before problems escalate and each party believes the other is being unreasonable. Often a discreet word neighbour-to-neighbour will clear the matter up, as it is easy to overlook how our actions will impact or cause offence. The very last resort is to make someone homeless by evicting them from their home, but if every other effort has been taken to avoid this then it is an action that we will pursue.

Over recent years the issue of anti-social behaviour has come to everyone's attention, but the media focus on tackling anti-social behaviour has at times given a distorted impression of how easy it is to deal with the issue. The reality is that tackling anti-social behaviour requires a concerted and prolonged effort from us as a landlord, but also other organisations like the police, local authority and usually other support related agencies. It takes considerable resources, as ultimately courts are disinclined to look favourably on legal actions unless they can clearly see that all other methods have failed.

If you want to find out more about our approach then access our policy and procedure relating to anti-social behaviour on the website or contact us and ask to be sent a copy.



# What's NEW@HQ

## POLITICAL UPDATE:

*- all change for affordable housing*

The coalition government looks set to introduce some sweeping changes which will impact the way in which housing associations like English Rural develop and manage homes. The proposed changes are detailed in the consultation paper 'Local decisions – a fairer future for social housing' and include proposals to set higher rents on new homes, introduce new 'flexible tenancies' for all future tenants, enabling significant changes to the long term management. At the same time changes are being introduced to the way future benefits will be calculated and paid, through the proposed 'universal credit' and in addition the planning system is likely to see changes to help put planning decisions in the hands of local people.

The chances are that these changes may affect your household either now or in years to come and Government is asking for your views. To find out more and have your say, please visit <http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/housing/socialhousingreform> to take part in the online consultation process.

The changes being introduced also cover the way that English Rural is regulated. Residents may recall that over the past two years a new regulatory body had been established called the Tenant Services Authority or TSA. Recent announcements have highlighted that the TSA is one of the many government organisations which are being abolished and its main regulatory responsibilities will instead pass to the Homes and Communities Agency, which also funds new affordable homes. Details are still emerging, but it is likely that the regulatory framework introduced by the TSA, which sought to focus on developing services in line with what residents want, will remain more-or-less the same.

## AWARDS:

*- Latest development wins national design award*

English Rural's 12 new homes at Rickyard Road, Wrington, Somerset have won a coveted national design award from Local Authority Building Control. The award recognises the quality of the design and buildings provided as well as the professional approach to carrying out the development. The homes at Rickyard Road were a result of a partnership with Progression Homes UK and North Somerset District Council, with funding provided by the Homes and Communities Agency.



## Contact Us

info@englishrural.org.uk  
www.englishrural.org.uk

### Repairs Line

Tenants should report repairs and required property maintenance on the number below:

**0800 121 4422**

(9am to 5pm Mon - Fri)

In case of emergencies:

**01722 757874**

(out of hours)

### Head Office

Accounts, lettings, sales, rents, standing orders, permissions and other general enquiries

English Rural  
Housing Association  
Hall House  
9 Graphite Square  
Vauxhall Walk  
London SE11 5EE

Tel: 020 7820 7930

Fax: 020 7820 7931

### Development Office

RCCE House  
Threshelfords Business Park  
Inworth Road  
Feering  
Essex CO5 9SE

Tel: 01376 571714

### Housing Managers

**Chris Graves**

Tel: 02392 383993

Mobile: 07752 383993

**Jo Passmore**

Tel: 01304 841666

Mobile: 07552 126679

**Katie Maclean**

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