## Tenant Topics

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Merry Christmas and Happy New Year from all at Two Rivers Housing

# Paul proves that anything is possible.

Paul Davis' neighbours may not know it, but there is an England bowls champion living in their midst.

And their surprise will be complete when they realise the ex-builder and rugby player has overcome a severe visual impairment to achieve his honours.

Paul's life changed 26 years ago following surgery for a brain tumour and it took him four years to recover from the shock of the damage to his eyesight, and adjust to a new way of life.

"Then I decided to try bowls for blind people" explained Paul. "I'd never played before but I really enjoyed my first session. It has taken a lot of practice to get the weight, distance and angles right, but I got better and began to travel around the UK for matches."

Paul (51), has accomplished many things since he started to play. Not only has he represented England for 12 years, but he

was the first visually-impaired player in the South West to win and become club champion for a sighted team. He has played in Israel and was selected to play in South Africa, but sadly did not have the sponsorship to cover his expenses. He was also named 'Sports Personality of the Forest of Dean' this year.

"Bowls has given me another challenge in life," said Paul, who moved to his Two Rivers Home in Cinderford this summer. "Playing with sighted people means I have to be on top of my game and I really enjoy that.

"I have learnt a new sport and that has given me many social and travel opportunities, too. Representing England and bringing home gold medals is the icing on the cake."







Excited residents have settled into their brand new homes in Lydney, and one of them was delighted to find local MP Mark Harper waiting to hand her the keys on the day she moved in!

Marina Tolhurst was allocated one of our flexi-flats and she was pleased to show Mr Harper our innovative concept which allows the space to be adapted to suit people's changing needs.

This one bedroom home has largerthan-average living space which means it can easily be divided to gain a second bedroom if required. The Orchard Road scheme is our second development using the flexi-flat design.

Marina registered on Homeseeker Plus and was thrilled to be selected based on her requirements, including her health and the need to be closer to her family for support.

"I'm ecstatic," she said. "The flat is beautiful. I was brought up in Lydney and all my children and grandchildren are here, so it is wonderful to be back. I have missed cooking for my family and having them around me. I am very excited."

The four one-bedroom 'flexi-flats' and two two-bedroom houses are all set at affordable rent, and help to meet the demand for smaller, low-cost homes in the Lydney area.



## Tenants calling!

Our Customer Service team handles an average 4,500 telephone calls every single month.

This works out at 14 calls a year from every one of our homes and means we need to be ready to answer a wide variety of questions, and not keep callers waiting.

We want to help you as quickly as we can when you contact with us, so the Customer Service team has been developing a new system to manage calls more efficiently.

This involves our call-handlers having extra information about you and your home at their fingertips so they know exactly the right questions to ask when you call. Often, this means they can help you without involving colleagues in other departments, leading to a quicker service.

Each Customer Service Adviser manages over 8,000 calls a year and we aim to deal with each one as efficiently as the next.

#### Holiday Club success

The importance of a healthy breakfast cannot be underestimated and families attending our Holiday Club in Cinderford couldn't agree more!

With the offer of a free nutritious breakfast and a range of activities for children, the event attracted around 70 people and proved to be a resounding success.

The children tucked into porridge, toast, fruit and yogurt, made new friends and enjoyed Hallowe'en-themed arts and crafts, face-painting, board games and toys.

Local NHS representatives also gave out free toothpaste and toothbrushes and offered advice.

Paula Parkes took her daughters Alicia and Zara to the club. She said: "The girls have enjoyed a good breakfast and are having lots of fun. It is great to have something like this where they can play, meet other children and be safe".

This is the third event we have run in Cinderford and we hope to hold more at other locations in the new year, so keep an eye out for adverts on social media and our website.

Owen Chandler, our Welfare, Benefit and Debt Assistant said: "We know that, in an ideal world, a good healthy breakfast is the most important meal of the day. However, we are aware there are a lot of children in Gloucestershire whose parents struggle to afford a healthy breakfast, especially during the school holidays.

"These clubs provide important opportunities for children and parents to have something nutritious to eat, to socialise, have fun and gain advice and support if wanted."





#### Reporting a power cut

Do you know who to contact if you have a power cut? Don't call your electricity supplier – call 105 instead.

This new national number is the same for everyone, regardless of who provides your electricity, and it's completely free of charge.

This does not apply if you are on the Property Services Register, and known to need extra support during a power failure, eg for vital medical equipment. If this is you, continue to use the telephone number you have been given.

For everyone else, save the number **105** in your telephone now, so that it's ready when you need it. And, if you have a power failure, make sure you have a torch handy, keep warm and leave a light switched on, so you know when the power is restored.

#### Not a blip!

If you have a visual impairment, you might be interested in a social group in Cinderford that brings together people in a similar situation, twice a month.

The Blind and Partially Sighted group (BLIPS) meets at Crawshay Place every other Monday between 10am and midday, to enjoy card games, quizzes, gentle exercise and lunch.

A £5 charge per person covers all the costs, including transport. If you would like to know more, please contact

Helen Nash on 01594 543890.



Sue (centre) celebrates with colleagues Anthea Tawney (left) and Hannah Doel at the award ceremony.

One of our colleagues has been honoured with a top national award celebrating nearly five decades of dedication to her profession.

Sue Barter, who has worked with us for 13 years, was crowned winner of the 'Outstanding Contribution' award by Executive PA magazine.

Her administrative career began in 1968 following secretarial college and she also worked in Australia for many years. She is now Executive Assistant to our directors.

"Sue is always willing to help and will put other people first, even if it means staying late to finish her own work," explained colleague Anthea Tawney. "She has a calm, can-do attitude and a sense of humour we all love."

This summer we gave Sue our own commendation with our highest possible 'Beyond Excellence' award at our annual staff recognition event.

#### **SAVING TIP**

Take advantage of the January sales to grab wrapping paper, cards, baubles, a new tree or even presents, ready for next Christmas.

## Don't let arrears build up

When you sign a tenancy agreement with us, you make a legally-binding commitment to pay your rent when it is

Income from rent pays 90% of our running costs so, as long as the money comes in, we can continue to provide low-cost homes for all our tenants.

If it doesn't, and people get further behind with their rent, we may be forced to take legal action to recover the money — and, as a last resort, we will evict them.

Please help us to avoid this.

- Rent can be paid 24/7 so find a way that suits you. Direct Debit is easy and flexible and, once set up, it happens automatically.
- Talk to us as soon as you fall behind as we may be able to help, and it will be easier when the arrears are low.
- If we have to take you to court, there are extra costs running into hundreds of pounds that you will have to pay, in addition to the rent you owe.
- 'Starter' tenants who fall into arrears will lose their home **without** a court hearing and be liable for costs.
- If you are evicted due to arrears and still don't pay, you may not be able

- to apply for housing with another organisation until the debt is paid. There is also no guarantee that the local authority will house you.
- Having children living with you does not prevent an eviction.
- Having a disability or medical condition is not a reason not to pay rent.

We don't want to take anyone to court, so please talk to our Income Collection team as soon as you have any trouble paying your rent. You may also like to speak to our Welfare, Benefit and Debt advisors who offer confidential, expert help in a wide range of situations. Just call or email us to make an appointment.



# Why not get involved?

Meet our new Community Engagement team – working hard to build community spirit and reduce the loneliness felt by many people living in this beautiful, but often remote, location.

The team's role is varied. It aims to bring neighbours together by organising and supporting events, helping tenants to learn new skills and giving advice on services they might benefit from.

Julie Burlow heads up the team, supported by Penny Mail and Francois Jensen.

"We are really keen to help residents be more involved in their communities," explained Julie.

"There's a lot going on that people can join in, but we'd like to know if we could help more with social or activity groups or perhaps getting better access to local services."

Many of you will have met them at our recent Holiday Club in Cinderford or the 'Get Online' digital sessions at our schemes. They've also supported community clean-up days, social group meetings, lunch clubs and coffee mornings.

Two Rivers tenants can get involved in many different ways, such as telephone surveys, 'mystery shopping' or examining our services in detail to suggest improvements. We offer coaching, mentoring and training too, so people can develop in these roles if they choose to.

Julie, Penny and Francois would be delighted to know if you have any ideas for being involved. You can get in touch by email – communityengagement@2rh. org.uk – or call 0800 316 0897.

## Charging mobile devices safely

The UK has seen an increase of counterfeit electrical goods over the years, which have resulted in electrical shock, injury and fires. To reduce the risks consider the following:

- Use the manufacturer's supplied charger for the equipment. Cheap unbranded off-the-shelf chargers and cables often fail to meet the requirements of the Electrical Equipment Regulations Act 1994.
- Look for the CE marking on the charger but don't rely on this alone as they can be forged.
- Check the charger and equipment for signs of damage before connecting to a socket.
- Don't charge devices when they can't be supervised i.e. when you're in bed or when you leave the house.
- Don't place equipment that is being charged on soft furnishings. They can get hot and cause a fire.
- Ensure there is plenty of ventilation around the equipment during charging and that cables are not trapped or twisted.
- Don't overload sockets.
- When the equipment has been charged, remove the plug from the socket.
- Keep equipment that is being charged out of reach from children.

#### Facts and figures

1.8 million mobile phone chargers are bought online in the UK each year. Unsafe devices are often made in China and found to have poor quality components and don't have safety features such as fuses.

The UK has seen a six-fold increase in the number of counterfeit electrical goods seized over the previous four years, with the most-seized items being chargers.





Two Rivers staff support many community projects and this time they rolled up their sleeves and set to work on clearing rubbish and tidying flower beds for two Clean-Up Action Days.

Blakeney and Broadwell were our focus and we joined forces with Street

Wardens from Forest of Dean District Council and colleagues from Centigen Facilities Management to tackle the area.

These events have been running for the past three years, with around eight clean-up activities taking place each year in various locations around Gloucestershire.

"We focus on areas most in need," explained our Neighbourhood Housing Officer Shazia Sheikh, who helped to organise the event. "They generally have a larger older community that might otherwise find it difficult to get rid of their rubbish. We receive great feedback following these events with people saying they feel the area is left feeling safer, more welcoming and a better place to live."

All nearby residents had a flyer put through their door to encourage them to get involved, and we hired skips to clear the rubbish from gardens, garages, sheds and communal garden areas.

One resident. Mrs Morris. said:

"I was very pleased to have the rubbish moved from my shed. It has been there for over 12 months, but I couldn't move it. I thought it would be there for ever. Thank you."



#### Protect your home contents and belongings against fire, theft, storm, flood and much more this winter.

Two Rivers Housing has a special home contents insurance scheme available and all tenants are eligible to apply.

Contact Two Rivers Housing on

0800 316 0897

for further details.

Terms & conditions, limits and exclusions apply. A copy of the policy wording is available on request.



### **Next meeting**

Our Disability and Carers Forum is keen to welcome new members who would benefit from its regular programme of information and support.

The group meets every two months to share news and listen to guest speakers, and you don't have to be a Two Rivers tenant to join in.

Anyone with a disability or who cares for someone with a disability is welcome to attend, and meetings always include refreshments and a raffle.

The next two meetings are on 24 February in Newnham and 28 April in Lydney, between 10am and midday. Transport can also be arranged, if required.

If you would like to know more, please call us on **0800 316 0897**.

#### **SAVING TIP**

Sell unwanted gifts online and make some extra money to help you recover from the expense of Christmas. eBay, Shpock and Gumtree are all very popular, but you may also be able to sell locally through Facebook groups.

#### REGISTER FOR ALERTS

Manufacturers occasionally recall products for safety reasons and you can now register for automatic alerts if one of your appliances joins the recall list.

The register covers most of the UK's top selling brands of major white goods and other large and small kitchen appliances so, if you know the brand name, model and serial number of your items, go to www. registermyappliance.org.uk and log them for alerts, if and when they happen.

## Listen to our news

If you have problems reading Tenant Topics but don't want to miss out on the news, you might prefer to listen to it instead.

A group of staff get together each issue to read and record the stories and save it onto a CD, which is then posted to some of our tenants with visual impairments.

If you – or a neighbour – would like to receive our audio version of Tenant Topics, please let our Communications team know and we'll be happy to send a copy.

# Ethel Pritchard and June Williams learn about the internet from Neighbourhood Assistant Paul Gale.

#### Helping you to get connected

The internet is a great way to keep in touch with friends, read the news and find out lots of new information quickly.

It's also increasingly important for paying bills, shopping for discounts, banking and ordering goods online.

That's why we like to help our tenants learn how to use computers and explore the internet, and why several staff volunteered to lead help-sessions with residents with digital devices and show them what the internet can offer.

The turnout for the sessions at Willowdean in Cinderford and Watermead in Lydney was amazing, and we were able to help people with laptops, tablets and smartphones.

We also showed some people how to access the internet on the desktop computer which sits in the communal room and is free for tenants to use.

June Williams, who lives at Willowdean, said, "Ive been saying for a long time

that I wish I could learn how to use a computer. When it says on television to look at a website for more information I can't do it, but now I know I can come and have a go on the computer here. I'd like to learn more about how to look up information and try emailing."

In the last 10 years, almost 300,000 people have discovered the benefits of getting online. That makes these events particularly important and we are talking to partner agencies about delivering more extensive digital training sessions.



### Building begins

Work has begun on our first mixed development of bungalows for affordable rent and private sale.

Cleeve Chase in Newent is designed exclusively for people aged 50 and over, and 10 of the 17 two-bedroom homes will be sold on the open



market under our new Tandem Living banner – raising vital funds that will allow us to continue building homes for lowcost rent

The other seven will be available to bid for in the usual way, through HomeseekerPlus.

Our estate agency TwoCan will sell the bungalows on our behalf, and the first ones should be ready to move into in the summer.





## **Earning while they learn**

Three young people have joined our flourishing apprenticeship scheme this autumn, giving them a great chance to earn while they learn.

Our Human Resources, Executive PA and Centigen teams have each gained a new member of staff, and they are all working towards BTEC NVQ qualifications in Business Administration.

Katie Gibbon, Amelia Revill and Luke Warren join our existing apprentices – Liam Donegan, Brandon Godwin,

Annabelle Price and Nikola Szplitt – in taking advantage of the increasingly popular Government apprenticeship

Amelia (17), who has settled into the Human Resources team, said: "I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life when I left school, so I went on to do A levels.

"Although I enjoyed the freedom of college and being with my friends, I finished my first year and

didn't come out with the results I had wished for. I then applied for an apprenticeship because my friend did one and she said it was the best decision that she's ever

"Apprenticeships are good because you learn things through experience that you can't learn in a classroom environment. You also earn whilst you learn and that appealed to me too.

#### Grandson's win is pure Gold!

Most grandparents swell with pride at the mention of their grandchildren, but Trevor and Barbara Lewis have more reason than most to celebrate one of their grandchildren's achievements.

For Andrew took part in this year's Paralympics, and returned from Brazil with the ultimate sporting honour - a fabulous Gold medal.

"I knew he would do it," says a delighted Trevor. "He is so determined. When he makes his mind up, that's it. He just gets on and does it."

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Andrew had part of his leg amputated following an accident when he was just 16. It was devastating for the teenager who was about to start training for the Paras but he vowed to stay fit. Then, inspired by the 2012 Paralympics, he set his sights on training for the triathlon in Rio this summer.

Trevor and Barbara, who live at Danby Road in Yorkley, followed his race live online and couldn't wait to congratulate him when he called afterwards.

"We were over the moon when he won." said Barbara. "It's quite unbelievable, but he's made us so very proud."

Now Andrew is deciding whether or not to train for Tokyo in 2020, safe in the knowledge that, if he does, his grandparents will be cheering him all the way across the finishing line.



## Is it a snake...or a lizard?

Bream schoolchildren enjoyed a visit with a difference when they went slowworm spotting in their village.

We are building 13 new homes in Parkend Road – including nine for affordable rent and two for Shared Ownership – and have reserved an area for these shy legless lizards.

We thought it would be interesting for the local children to know more, and asked an ecology expert to explain their protected status and how valuable they are to gardeners. The group carefully lifted the pre-placed mats used to attract the slow-worms, and were delighted to find one basking underneath.

Inspired by their morning, the children then drew slow-worms and their pictures were judged by Veronica Parker,



our Development Assistant. It was a tough competition but six-year-old Laya Gunter was chosen as the winner and presented with her very own wormery and a certificate.

Jessica Peach-Miles, Deputy Head Teacher at Bream Primary School said:

"The children are studying minibeasts next year, so it was a great introduction. For the majority it was the first time they have seen a slow-worm and they were all surprised to hear they are actually not snakes. It was good to take them out to see some wildlife."



Laya Gunter receives her prizes from Veronica Parker.

## Centigen's new business

Staff at our Centigen subsidiary have been branching out and winning new business from local property developers.

The latest company to join Centigen's expanding client list is Newland Homes,

**SAVING TIP** Cut your Christmas food

shopping bill by seeking out supermarket own brands. They're just as tasty and nutritious as leading brands and usually cheaper, saving you money just when you need it.

and the team has been carrying out painting and maintenance work on its new homes, as well as looking after areas of grass and shrubs - and even a pond – at sites across the county and

This is a natural development of the team's skills and expertise which has won praise from the Gloucester-based

A promising start and great news for our subsidiary which will gift all its profits to Two Rivers to invest in improving homes and services.

#### **KEEP MOULD** AT BAY

Condensation is a regular hazard in our homes during the winter months and the main cause of damp and mould.

Homes that are properly heated and ventilated can avoid many of the associated problems, but the extra washing and cooking caused by having extra guests over Christmas, make this even more important.

If you go to the 'Looking after your home' section on our website and then to the page called 'Condensation and mould', you will find links to a short film and a leaflet, both of which will help you to avoid the worst of this particular winter problem.



One of our suppliers has helped recycle left-over kitchen units to support a Cinderford playgroup refurbishing its premises.

The surplus units and worktops were being held by our kitchen and bathroom supplier and fitter United Living, and a newspaper appeal by the Earlybirds Playgroup triggered an idea on how they could be used.

Two Rivers Surveyor Jenny Lamb visited the playgroup at St White's

Primary School with United Living's Site Manager Nic Carn to see if they could help. The result was a review of left-over stock, the presentation of some design ideas, and then a team of fitters and tilers went to the rescue.

Now the centre has a teaching facility for the children and a meeting place the whole community will benefit from.

We have a strong focus on supporting the communities where our tenants live and this was a great opportunity to use left-over units and work with United Living to improve the facilities that will help both the children, and the many local people who will use the centre.

Liz Probert, Manager for Earlybirds, said: "We are very grateful to Two Rivers Housing who donated the kitchen units and United Living who fitted them and did all the tiling."

Nic Carn, United Living Site Manager replied: "We were really pleased to be able to make a difference and help out."

# TwoCan joins in pioneering renovation

TwoCan, our estate agency business, is proud to have been selected by Gloucestershire College to market its properties following a pioneering real-life house renovation project.

Certainly not your average classroom, the college bought an outdated house in Tredworth, Gloucester for its construction and building students to work on as part of their training. Now completed to a professional standard, the property is up for sale.

The college wanted an estate agent with a difference too and chose TwoCan because all the profits are gifted to Two Rivers to invest in providing affordable homes.

The college is already looking at its next investment, so the partnership between TwoCan and our next generation of craftsmen and women looks set to continue.

Gerry McFall, Managing Director for TwoCan, commented: "I genuinely think this is an excellent concept and something that more colleges across the country should adopt. You simply can't beat working on a real project with real outcomes. It's an excellent opportunity for the students to learn and we are delighted to be involved. We look forward to continuing to support the college with these superb ventures."

www.tworivershousing.org.uk



#### Friends organise anniversary surprise

Barry and Maureen Phillips had no plans when they woke on the morning of their 65th wedding anniversary – but their friends and neighbours had different ideas.

Together they hatched a plan for an early visit from the postman, a surprise lunch, a beautiful celebration cake and singing from the Bream school choir.

Our Finance Manager John Watkins also turned up with a hamper of goodies from Two Rivers Housing to add to their 'blue sapphire' celebration.

The popular Ryelands couple were delighted with the show of friendship from the community they have become a firm part of in the last 12 years.

Maureen and Barry spent most of their married years in South Africa. Barry was an RAF engineer and then worked for a Rhodesian airline, while Maureen, who trained as an ophthalmic nurse, continued to work in health. They have one son, two grandchildren and two great grandchildren.

Barry has always been a keen, competitive cyclist and used to complete a 200-mile weekend round trip on his bike to see Maureen. He was head coach to the Rhodesian cycling team at the 1980 Olympic Games and

still uses the bike in the Ryelands gym to keep himself in trim.

Many congratulations to Barry and Maureen and big thanks to Ann Payne for her hard work in arranging their special day!



## Iris regains her independence

Independence is highly valued, and one of our Coleford tenants has had hers restored since a wetroom was installed at her home.

Mobility problems made it impossible for Iris Smailes to get in and out of the bath unaided, but the wetroom means she can wash on her own again, and she's encouraging others to consider similar changes to regain their independence.

Iris contacted the county council's social care team and an occupational therapist visited to assess her needs. Once a grant was approved, we worked with her to plan the wetroom and find a contractor to do the work.

"I was over the moon with the contractor," said a delighted Iris. "He

was the loveliest man and worked tirelessly. Ian from Two Rivers was also a great help and kept me informed of what was happening.

"This has made a huge difference to me and I would really encourage others to see if they can get help, too."

Projects like this – and smaller adaptations such as grab rails –should be assessed by an occupational therapist first. Major works requiring funding will be means-tested.

Call Gloucestershire Social Care Help Desk on **01452 426868** or the Herefordshire Council Advice and Referral Team on **01432 260101** if you wish to discuss your options.









Just circle the differences – there are 10 to be found.

Festive tea break

Many congratulations to
Mrs S Prosser of Sedbury
who is the winner of our
Hallowe'en-themed wordsearch.

This was a popular competition, and well done everyone who entered, as you all managed to find the 16 hidden words. However, we can only have one winner and we hope Mrs Prosser will enjoy spending her prize.

This time we're inviting you to spot-thedifference and there are 10 to be found. Some are a little more subtle than others, but we're sure you'll have time to unearth them all over the Christmas holiday!

If you'd like the chance to win a £15 gift card, send your completed entry to:

Communications team Two Rivers Housing Cleeve Mill Lane Newent Gloucestershire GL18 1DS

before 13 January 2017.

If you are correct, you'll be entered into our prize draw to win a £15 voucher!

We hope you enjoy it – and good luck!

Name:

Address:

Tel number/email:

#### A pair of helping hands!

Two Rivers Housing has a strong history of supporting community projects, and we have teamed up with Travis Perkins to help even more people.

We are a key customer of Travis Perkins and, every time we buy supplies from them, they give us 1% cashback to spend on initiatives that help local charities and community schemes.

This has provided materials for several of our 'Helping Hands' ventures so far, and will allow us to do much more for those we support in the future.

Our staff have volunteered at 13 community projects so far this year, getting involved with gardening,

cleaning, stream-clearing, painting, fixing and even taking goats for a walk!

If you know any community projects we could support, please email helpinghands@2rh.org.uk or call 0800 316 0897.



#### Contact us:

Please tell us if you would like this in large print, on audio CD or in another language.

Freephone

0800 316 0897

Email

customerservices@2rh.org.uk

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