

Keeping You Safe at Home

Fire safety in your building is a shared responsibility we have with you!

To keep you safe at home we will

- Implement measures that will ensure our properties are safe and with reduced risk of fire incidents.
- Fit a smoke alarm on each floor of your home.
- Carry out regular fire safety checks as well as undertaking fire risk assessments every year.
- Make sure that all fire safety equipment – like fire doors, emergency lighting and alarms – is regularly inspected and in good working order
- Act swiftly to fix any issues that arise.

To keep yourself and others safe at home, you should...

- Make sure you know the fire exit routes within your property, and what you should do in case of a fire. Read the fire escape plans and signage displayed in communal areas
- Never obstruct or wedge open a communal door. These doors hold back fire and smoke for a minimum of 30 minutes but can only do that if they are closed.
- Keep exits from within your home clear, and keys to windows and doors at easy reach.
- Keep cupboards and doors providing access to electrical services in communal areas locked. They should not be used for storing rubbish or personal items to reduce risk of fire spreading.
- Never leave children alone in the kitchen or candles unattended when lit.
- Keep communal areas, corridors and staircases clear of large items such as prams, bikes, mobility scooters or large plant pots and close all doors at night to prevent the spread of fire.

Contact us immediately if you think you would have any problems being alerted or evacuating your building in the event of a fire, or if you are struggling with the guidance provided. If you see anything that isn't right report it!

My Home Tenants Home Contents Insurance

We have teamed up with the National Housing Federation and Thistle Tenant Risks to offer tenants and leaseholders the **My Home Contents Insurance Scheme**.

It's easy, flexible and affordable and you can pay cash fortnightly, monthly or annually. To find out more contact the Society for an application pack or contact **My Home Contents Insurance**:

- Call 0345 450 7288
- Email myhome@thistleinsurance.co.uk
- Visit www.thistlemyhome.co.uk



Welcome to this Spring edition of your Resident Newsletter.



Hello and welcome to your **SPRING 2022**

Newsletter

The last 2 years have been very difficult for so many people in so many ways, dealing with things that we have never experienced before. We would like to place on record our gratitude and thanks for your cooperation whilst we have all adapted to the many rules that we have had to implement either specifically from the government, or local ones that we introduced in our schemes to keep everyone as safe as they possibly could be.

As covid restrictions end and it feels like the country is now getting back to "normal", this year is set to present new challenges, but for different reasons. As inflation rises, and energy costs soar, there will be financial pressures for many and this is where we are hoping that our **Hardship Fund** will help us to help you. Have a look on Page 2 for more information.

Inside this edition:

- ◆ Tenancy Fraud
- ◆ Changes to your rent & service charges
- ◆ Hardship Fund
- ◆ Help with Your Energy Costs
- ◆ Furniture Recycling Scheme
- ◆ Fire Safety
- ◆ Gas Safety
- ◆ Competition

We hope you enjoy reading this newsletter. If you have any ideas for articles or information that you would like to see in future editions please let us know.

We welcome your feedback

We provide an any day/any frequency **Direct Debit** service to make it easier for you to pay your rent or other charges. Set up is simple and can be done over the phone in just a few minutes. For more information call us on **01782 968566** or go to our website www.stokeontrenthousingsociety.org.uk



-----TEAR HERE-----

Complete the missing words in the sentences below:

1. The Society is proud to be part of the Staffordshire Counter _____ Partnership
2. If you are affected, you must do this **on** or as soon **after** _____ **as** possible
3. The fund is to cover items that could help to improve the _____ of a tenant or their family.
4. The Society is required by law to carry out an _____ safety/service check to all gas
5. All electricity customers will get _____ off their energy bills this Autumn
6. Never obstruct or _____ open a communal door.

Now complete your name and contact details below and send us an image of your entry slip via **WhatsApp** to **07876897172** or email info@stokeontrenthousingsociety.org.uk. Alternatively, send your completed entry slip to The Trevor Jones Office, Hammond House, Ridgway Road, Hanley, ST1 3AX.

The 2 lucky winners will be drawn on 28th March 2022 and must be a tenant or leaseholder of the Society.

Name:..... Address:
 Mobile:
 Telephone number: Email:



Tenancy Fraud



Tenancy fraud means that people in genuine need of housing are losing out. This is unfair and illegal. The Society is proud to be part of the Staffordshire Counter Fraud Partnership, helping to crack down on people who sublet or abandon their social housing tenancies and fraud in general.

For more information go to www.staffsfraud.org or call us on 01782 968566. #SpotTheCheater

Spring is around the corner!

The Society's Estate team is busy preparing for the growing season ahead and our contractors will soon be getting back to cutting the grass and shrubs across our various schemes.

If you have any particular concerns about the outside space around your scheme or neighbours gardens please contact our Estate Team on 01782 968566.

Easter Closing Times

Our offices close at **5pm on Thursday 14th April** and will re-open at **9am on Tuesday 19th April**.

If you need to report an emergency repair during this time, call **01782 968566**, press **1** on your telephone keypad and you'll be connected to our emergency service. For any other repairs please wait until our office opens on **Tuesday 19th April**.

Spring your rent account back into credit – put Rent First

Remember to keep your rent payments up to date. If your struggling with paying your rent call us today.

The last thing we want to do is evict tenants, but if we have to WE WILL!

Changes to your rent & service charges

The way that Housing Associations set their rents is determined by the Government's 2020 Rent Standard, which guides how rents are set for the five years from April 2020. The standard outlines that Housing Associations can increase social and affordable housing rents by a maximum of inflation plus 1% (the inflation measure used is the September Consumer Price Index which was 3.1% in September 2021).

This means that this April your rent will increase by 4.1%.

We understand that this may have a significant impact and comes alongside rising inflation and increasing fuel and utility costs. Indeed, these rising costs are also impacting on the costs of providing our services.

We need to implement the rent increase so that we can continue to:

- Provide and improve the services we deliver to our tenants
- Invest in maintaining and improving your homes
- Build more homes for people in housing need

If we don't do this, there is a higher risk that we may face tougher financial challenges in the future, making it harder for us to deliver services to residents, invest in our existing homes and build new homes for people who need them.

Service Charges

Where your payments include a separate service charge element this is not affected by the rent standard. Instead, we review your service charges and amend them in accordance with the costs of providing those services. The service charge leaflet that you received with your rent increase letter details your new reviewed charges.

Need support?

We know that these are tough times as living and energy costs rise. Please get in touch if you have a query about it or if you think you'll have difficulty paying. We have a Wellbeing Coordinator that can work with you to ensure that you have maximised your income and can help you manage your finances and support you through changes to income or circumstances.

We also have a hardship fund that is available to provide practical one-off support to those customers most in need. If you need help or advice, please contact us now on 01782 968566.

Which? Scam Alerts

Scammers send scam emails or text messages, trying to convince you to click on a link.

Once clicked, you may be sent to a fake website that could download viruses onto your computer or steal your passwords and personal information.

Over the phone, the approach may be more direct, asking you for sensitive information, such as banking details. They do this by pretending to be from someone or an organisation you trust.

To help you keep one step ahead of the scammers, Which? Group have set up a free scam alert service. The alerts are regular email updates on the latest scams doing the rounds - and practical advice to help you outsmart the scammers.

It only takes a minute to register; visit [campaigns.which.co.uk/scam-alert-service/](https://www.which.co.uk/scam-alert-service/)



The DWP has provided the following advice for tenants who receive Universal Credit and need to update them with a change in their rent and service charge.

If you are affected, you must do this **on** or as soon **after 4th April as** possible or you will fall into arrears.

- ◆ 1. Log into your Universal Credit account
- ◆ 2. You will be sent an action called a "To-Do"
- ◆ 3. The To-do will be titled "Update your Housing Costs".
- ◆ 4. You will need to respond to questions to establish whether your rent or service charge liability has changed
- ◆ 5. You will then be prompted to declare and confirm your new housing costs

If you need any more help or advice on this contact your **work coach** or contact us on **01782 968566**



Furniture Recycling Scheme

In October 2021 we introduced a furniture recycling scheme to make better use of furniture and items left behind in our empty homes, gifting them to tenants in need and helping to reduce our carbon footprint.

Our estate team collects items that are in good condition and enters them onto a database that is then used by our housing officers to help match existing or new tenants in need with available items.

Guidance is followed in terms of safety, for example ensuring fire labelling is present where required, and a gifting disclaimer is signed on receipt of goods.

The scheme is very much a team effort with the Estate Officers Jon and Chris collecting and helping to distribute items, Erica our Housing Assistant managing stock control and our Housing Team, Lisa, Lynn and Rachel providing customer liaison.

Even though it is still early days, so far we have helped 15 tenants and new tenants by gifting items.

As our stock of items is limited, we have also recently entered a referral arrangement with Emmaus North Staffs (formerly Furniture Mine) that enables us to request specific used furniture items and new white goods at reduced costs.

If you feel that you might benefit from our Furniture Recycling Scheme email us info@stokeontrenthousingsociety.org.uk or give us a call.

Your Feedback is Important !

The Regulator of Social Housing is proposing new Tenant Satisfaction Measures in 2023.

In preparation for this the Society will be introducing a number of new tenant satisfaction surveys over the coming months. If you are contacted and asked to give feedback please do so, it helps us to improve and shape our services.



Gas Safety

The Society is required by law to carry out an annual safety/service check to all gas pipework, boilers and appliances installed within its homes. These checks are required to make sure your pipework, boiler and appliances are safe and the risk of any gas or carbon monoxide poisoning is minimised for your household.

We carry out these checks on a 10 monthly cycle so that we can make sure the work is complete and you are safe before the anniversary date.

The gas service visit should only take approximately 30-40 minutes to complete and can make sure your life is not put at risk.

Our gas maintenance contractor, Brendan Fern Ltd, will be contacting any tenants that have gas in their property within the next few weeks to arrange an appointment.

Please allow access, it could save your life!

Don't forget that your clocks will need to be put forward by 1 hour on 27th March !

Hardship Fund

As part of the Society's commitment to **Give Something Back** a **Hardship Fund** has been created to help Society tenants and their families who may be experiencing hardship or unexpected and unplanned financial difficulties.

The fund is to cover items that could help to improve the wellbeing of a tenant or their family, and there is no definitive list of eligible items. Here are a few examples of the types of things that we can assist with:

- ◆ Beds and mattresses, carpets and curtains
- ◆ White goods
- ◆ Clothes or travel expenses for an interview or
- ◆ Books for a college/university course
- ◆ Food vouchers and utility bills

As they complete their annual tenancy visits, officers have been busy identifying tenants who might need help through our hardship fund, and so far this year they have supported over 30 tenants with the fund. Self-referrals can also be made by tenants themselves who are struggling and need help.

Our general eligibility criteria for the fund are that we would expect a qualifying person to be in receipt of housing benefit or the housing cost element of Universal Credit and to have savings under £1000. We may also consider those on a low income. For this reason, we do ask for information about the finances of all those making an application to the fund, which of course we keep confidential.

Any Hardship Fund payments are made directly to the provider/supplier by the Society. Also, a hardship fund payment does not include any reduction in rent or service charges but is 'a one off' financial assistance payment.

If you would like help and would like to talk to us about how the Hardship Fund might work for you, please give email us info@stokeontrenthousingsociety.org.uk or call us on

Help With Your Energy Costs

Wholesale energy prices are at an all-time high and, unfortunately, costs are being passed onto consumers. These rises have been caused by a particularly cold European winter last year, gas supply issues and lower volumes of stored gas. Gas prices impact the cost of all energy, including the cost of renewable electricity like solar and wind. All energy suppliers are pushing up their prices.

The government has recently announced help with energy bills in the form of:

- A £150 council tax rebate in April to all households in bands A to D. If you pay council tax by Direct Debit, the council will use your bank account details to credit your account with a one-off payment of £150. If you don't pay via Direct Debit, the council will process the claim for you.
- All electricity customers will get £200 off their energy bills this Autumn. The £200 will be recovered from bills in £40 instalments each year for five years, starting in the financial year 2023/2024. It is expected to be added to the standing charge on bills.

Here's some advice that may help:

- If you're struggling to afford your gas and electricity bills, contact your supplier to discuss ways to pay what you owe them, they must help you come to a solution. You should try to negotiate a deal that works for both of you.
- You might be able to repay your debt directly from your benefits through the **Fuel Direct Scheme**. A fixed amount will automatically be taken from your benefits to cover what you owe, plus an extra amount for your current use. It can be more convenient than having a prepayment meter fitted (which your supplier might try to do if you can't agree a payment plan) and you won't risk running out of gas or electricity.
- There are energy companies who offer grants and schemes that are open to anyone - you don't have to be a customer. Go to <https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/consumer/energy/energy-supply/> for more information.
- You might be able to get a **grant from a charitable trust** to help pay off your debts, www.charisgrants.com has more information on available grants and how to apply.
- You might be able to get £140 off your electricity bill under the **Warm Home Discount Scheme** if you're either getting the guaranteed credit part of Pension Credit or are on a low income. Check with your supplier to see if they offer the Warm Home Discount - not all suppliers are part of the scheme.
- The **Winter Fuel Payment** is an annual one-off payment to help you pay for heating during the winter. You can usually get a Winter Fuel Payment if you were born on or before 26 September 1955. For more info go to <https://www.gov.uk/winter-fuel-payment>

We want you to know that we understand the distress this can cause. The key piece of advice we give to anyone who is struggling is that you're not alone; but we can only help if you speak to us. Contact us now.