



In touch

The newsletter
for tenants of
South Western
Housing Society

Special Edition



Introducing The Tenant Services Authority

THE SOCIETY IS REGISTERED AS A HOUSING ASSOCIATION with a government body that oversees all that we do and makes sure that we perform well and remain financially sound. Until November 2008, that body was The Housing Corporation who, as well as regulating us, were also responsible for giving grant to Housing Associations to help them build new affordable homes.

From the 1st December 2008, two new agencies were created. The Homes and Communities Agency was created to take responsibility for providing grant

funding to Associations wishing to build.

The Tenant Services Authority was created to regulate Housing Associations.

The Tenants Services Authority (the TSA) want to hear directly from tenants and residents of Housing Associations and find out what is important to them and where the focus of the regulation should be.

The TSA are undertaking a nationwide consultation from January through to March 2009 asking tenants and residents what they think.

HOW CAN I GET INVOLVED?

There are a number of ways you can get involved if you want to -

- 1. Fill out a questionnaire. We have enclosed the TSA questionnaire with this newsletter and you should send it back (there is no stamp required) to the address at the end of the survey by 16th March 2009.**
- 2. Attend a regional TSA event - There will be two events in our region:**
 - 4th March Plymouth, Duke of Cornwall Hotel 11.00am to 1.00pm**
 - 5th March Bristol, Ashton Gate stadium 11.00am to 1.00pm**

If you want to attend a regional event please let us know at the latest by **FRIDAY 20TH FEBRUARY**. We will then try to book you into an event. The TSA expects demand for places to be very high so please let us know. You can email us on info@swhs.org.uk or you can ring the office on 01934529990. **Please mention the National Conversation when ringing or e-mailing.**

You may also look at the TSA website www.tenantservicesauthority.org which has all the information regarding the National Conversation.

The Society has also organised a focus group for tenants. This will take place in Bridgwater at the Exchange Park on 3rd March, from 10.15am to 12.30pm. If you are interested in joining please contact our Housing Manager, Martin Carney at the office 01934 529990 by Friday 20th February.

An Introduction from the Tenant Services Authority

WE ARE THE TENANT SERVICES AUTHORITY, the new regulator for affordable housing. We launched on 1 December 2008, having taken over the regulatory powers of the Housing Corporation. We believe housing matters, and that access to good quality housing improves lives. Our goal, quite simply, is to raise the standard of services for tenants.

How are we making this happen?

First and foremost, we are a champion for tenants – standing up for their interests and aspirations, and putting their needs first. There are some 10 million people in England living in one form of social housing or another – and a further 5 million who can't afford to buy a home but who aren't considered needy enough to be allocated a home to rent.

We're here to work for them all. We want landlords to deepen and accelerate how they work with tenants – allowing the very people whose lives are affected by the quality of their landlord's services to have a say in the way their homes are managed.

We are challenging providers. This starts with challenging them to be financially viable and well governed. We're working with them to make sure that is a given. But we want more too. The gap between excellent and mediocre affordable housing services today is both inexplicable and unacceptable – so we're working with tenants and landlords to help providers raise their game.

And we will shape the sector. We're helping to create more choice – in the way housing is managed, in the choices offered to tenants, in the kinds of tenure available, in the landlords who provide it and in the way providers raise funds.

We are going to make much better use of the data collected from landlords and make that data readily accessible to providers, their boards and their tenants. We believe better access to information will help providers to improve constantly.

To achieve all of this, we have to act intelligently, decisively and confidently. Our focus is on performance, both of the landlords we work with and the people we employ. Only in this way will the Tenant Services Authority be a real catalyst for change, one that will transform the sector and improve the quality of life for millions of people.

As a regulator we believe in proportionate regulation. That means where providers are strong and tenants are satisfied, there should be very little for us to do. Where standards are slipping, governance is weak, finances fragile and/or tenants

are unhappy, we will intervene to get things done.

When is all this happening?

To understand what issues matter most to tenants, we need to listen to their views. So, from January to the end of March 2009, we're going to hold a nationwide conversation with tenants, going out to meet them face to face and find out from them what services they need and standards they expect.

Only then can we begin to develop a regulatory framework that puts tenants' priorities first. Which means that in spring 2009, based on what we've heard, we'll consult further with both tenants and landlords to shape a system that will do just that. Then in the summer, we'll publish a formal consultation on the detail of our plans, and begin implementing the new regulatory framework in the autumn.

Whilst we develop our new ways of working we will continue to regulate using the older powers of the Housing Corporation, but with an unapologetic focus on financial viability during these difficult economic times.

Once we have completed the consultation on the new framework, we will turn on the extra powers in the 2008 Housing and Regeneration Act that established the TSA. Those powers provide us with a much better 'toolkit' to intervene to get things sorted for the benefit of tenants.

In spring 2010, the TSA is likely to become responsible for all affordable housing, whether it's provided by local authorities, arm's-length management organisations or housing associations. Private landlords will be able to register as providers of social housing too.

All this adds up to one of the biggest shake ups in affordable housing in decades, and one that will allow social housing tenants – no matter who their landlord is – to receive the very highest standards of service.

Our Offices:

Maple House	Fourth Floor
149 Tottenham Court Rd	One Piccadilly Gardens
London	Manchester
W1T 7BN	M1 1RG

For enquiries contact us at:

Tel: 0845 230 7000

Fax: 0113 233 7101

Email: enquiries@tsa.gsx.gov.uk
www.tenantservicesauthority.org

Rent Increase 1st April 2009

IT'S THIS TIME OF THE YEAR THE SOCIETY SETS ITS RENTS for the forthcoming year. Rents are only allowed to increase in line with the inflation rate agreed by the Regulator in October 2008, plus a 1/2 per cent. This year the Regulator has set the inflation rate at 5%.The Society has agreed to increase all rents by 5.5% from 1st April 2009.

As well as increasing rents generally, the Society, like other Housing Associations, has to operate a rental system whereby all rents move to a standard target rent by 2012.The Government and the Regulator have a formula for all affordable housing that calculates what the target rent should be for each dwelling in each area. This means that some rents that are too low need to increase above the annual increase of 5.5% to get to target, and some rents that are too high need to increase by less than 5.5% to ensure they don't exceed target.

The Society is only allowed to either add or deduct from the 5.5% a maximum of £2 per week.

The average rent for the Society will be £79.62 per week and the average increase is 6.83%. The 1.33% average increase over and above the 5.5% is due to the rent restructuring process which harmonises rents across the country.

We have not increased our garage rents for tenants this year. There may be some good news for next year as we are expecting inflation to be low throughout the year which should result in lower increases next year.

With the credit crunch biting and increases in fuel bills more people are struggling with debt.

There is advice on the internet - websites include:

National Debtline 0808 808 4000

www.nationaldebtline.co.uk

We will be writing to all tenants shortly to tell you the rent increase (and any service charge) for your home. If you are claiming Housing Benefit you should notify the local housing benefit office of the change (contact details are given below)

If you have difficulty paying your rent please contact your local authority to see if you are eligible for housing benefit. Also please contact us, we will be sympathetic. If you don't tell us you are having problems we won't know.

Some useful contact numbers are;

South Hams District Council Housing Benefit:	01803 861234
South Gloucestershire Housing Benefit:	01454 868686
Sedgemoor Housing Benefit:	01278 435477
Mendip Housing Benefit:	01749 648999
West Devon Housing Benefit:	01822 618888
Taunton Deane Housing Benefit:	01823 356321
Mid Devon Housing Benefit:	01884 234318
North Wiltshire Housing Benefit:	01249 706111
South Somerset Housing Benefit:	01935 462462
West Dorset Housing Benefit:	01305 251010
West Somerset Housing Benefit:	01643 703704

If you are concerned about debt your local CAB provides a useful advice service and there are free advice lines offered nationally on the internet.

Service Charges

IF YOU RECEIVE SERVICES FROM THE SOCIETY for communal things such as grounds maintenance, you will have a service charge to pay on top of your rent. Service charges are variable and may go up or down depending upon the actual cost to the Society of providing the service. We will notify you of any change to your service charge if applicable.

© Olga Lyubkina | Dreamstime.com



HomeSwapper

THE SOCIETY IS NOW a member of HomeSwapper which is an organisation incorporating registered social landlords giving tenants free access to mutual exchange properties. It is the largest mutual exchange service for council and housing association tenants wanting to swap homes, enabling more choice and providing an additional housing option.

The benefits of HomeSwapper are:

- it is a local and national service
- it is easy to register
- it generates thousands of potential swaps weekly
- it can match alerts by email and text
- it has a forum to share more information
- it is a powerful searching tool

If you wish to find out more about HomeSwapper, please visit their website www.HomeSwapper.co.uk or contact our housing officer, Yvonne Dennis, who can provide further information.