

■ **Performance update:** Our final performance figures for the year 2009/2010 are as given below. The format for these performance figures are judged on the combined performance of new claims and changes of circumstances.

Average time to process a new claim - 25 days
 Average time to process a change in circumstance - 4 days
 This gives a combined performance of 7 days

To arrive at this end combined performance figure, the number of days to process a new claim and a change of circumstance are divided by the number of claims dealt with.

Benchmarked against other Surrey Local Authorities, we are one of the top performers.

■ **Local Housing Allowance:** The Chancellor of the Exchequer announced in the emergency budget on 22 June that there will be changes in the way the Local Housing Allowance rates are calculated. At the moment, the rates given for each property type are based on Median calculations. From October 2010, it is likely that this will change to the 30th percentile values.

To put this into perspective, using the June rates for Outer South London, this is how they would be affected: *(Figures are indicative only and not a statement of fact)*

LHA June 2010					LHA 30th Percentile October 2011 <i>(based on June 2010 for illustration purposes)</i>				
1 Room	1 Bed	2 Bed	3 Bed	4 Bed	1 Room	1 Bed	2 Bed	3 Bed	4 Bed
80.55	155.34	195.62	241.64	322.19	75.00	149.59	184.11	218.63	295.50

The other significant change that will affect some rental values in the inner London areas will be that a new upper limit will be introduced for each property size, with upper limits set at:

- £250 a week for a 1 bedroom property
- £290 a week for a 2 bedroom property
- £340 a week for a 3 bedroom property
- £400 a week for a 4 bedroom property or larger.

Further information and the table of examples for the whole country can be found on the Valuation Office Website, Visit; www.voa.gov.uk/LHADirect/LHA-emergency-budget-news-2010.htm

No doubt that when these changes are implemented, along with the LHA rates reducing on a month to month basis, we will see an increase in requests for Discretionary Housing Payments.

We are already seeing that on the LHA anniversary review, many customers are now facing restrictions in their rent due to the LHA being reduced from last year. It may be helpful to check the latest LHA rates when reviewing your rent with your tenants. You may find that tenants will challenge any future rent increases.

■ **Landlord Forum:** In our last newsletter, we said that we would be having a landlord forum. This is going to be arranged for November. If you would like to put forward any suggestions for content, or just express an interest in attending, please contact -

Philippa Ibbotson, Housing Options Officer, Direct line: 01737 276439
 E-mail: philippa.ibbotson@reigate-banstead.gov.uk

■ **Nextstep:** Our Nextstep team are still looking for properties to recommend to their clients.

Nextstep is an established project operating within Reigate and Redhill YMCA. They are a free service to both landlords and tenants and work in partnership with Reigate and Banstead Borough Council. Following a referral from the Reigate and Banstead Housing Options Team, they undertake a detailed interview and assessment of clients housing needs, look closely at finances, offer advice, and undertake references.

Clients are only accepted on to the scheme once they are satisfied that they will make suitable tenants. They keep in regular contact with both the tenants and the landlords to prevent any problems that may otherwise have occurred. They also visit the property on a regular basis to ensure that it is being properly looked after.

They offer a guarantee bond deposit to landlords, up to the value of 4 weeks rent or 1 calendar month as an alternative to a conventional deposit. The guarantee covers loss/damage or non-payment of rent. They will meet with you and view the property giving each party an opportunity to discuss the project in further detail.

For landlords who are prepared to accept Housing Benefit customers, they will undertake all responsibility in administering the claim.

Please do not hesitate to contact a member of the Nextstep team on 01737 378482 for further information.

Landlord Portal: We are thinking of introducing a landlord portal sometime in the near future. This would be a direct link between you and our back office via the internet. You would have your own personal log in and password to streamline communication and speed up processes.

This facility would include the ability to:

- View your payment schedules
- Change your bank account details
- Notify us of changes in circumstances that you became aware of
- You would even be able to upload your rent increase schedules

More information will be provided as the project progresses; in the meantime, if you would like to volunteer to test the new portal, please contact Karen Robinson, our Service Support & Development Officer, on 01737 276286 email Karen.robinson@reigate-banstead.gov.uk

Benefits Survey: We recently sent out a survey form to customer who have claimed Housing Benefit and/or Council Tax Benefit in the last 6 months. We did this to see how we are performing from a customer service point of view and also to establish how they felt about the process of claiming.

204 Surveys were sent out, 44 were returned, and this gave a 21.5% return. Therefore, the percentages shown are a small representation of our customers.

29.5% claimed through unemployment. The results for these were that the majority of claimants found out how to claim either by our website or visit to a Help Shop. The majority returned the form back in person. This meant that 61.5% of this group supplied all the information required with their claim. They still found the process either ok or confusing and also needed to question our decision, but when they did, were satisfied with our response. Overall, they were happy with the service that they received.

9.1% claimed due to a rent increase. The results for these were that they obtained the information on how to claim either from their Housing Association, our website or through a visit to the Help Shop. Most of the claimants returned their form directly to the Help Shop in person. This group of people found the process to be OK. No one found it confusing or easy, however, it was 50/50 between meeting or not meeting their expectations. However, they were very happy with our service.

34.1% claimed as they were unable to manage their financial affairs. The results for these showed that the majority of customers found the information on how to claim from a Help Shop Visit. Again, the majority handed their claim in person to a Help Shop. 86.7% of this group supplied all the information we needed to process their claim. Some people found it easy to claim, but the majority found the process ok and a small minority confusing. For 60% of this group, the outcome met with their expectations. For this group of customers, it showed that they were happy with our service.

4.5% claimed through sickness. They found out how to claim either by a visit to the Help Shop or a request for a home visit.

Some posted the claim form back to us; some visited the Help Shop in person. This group of people were not confused by the process; they either found it easy or ok, and were totally happy with the service and it met their expectations.

Overall, of the people who returned the survey to us, 70.5% returned the application form to us in person to a Help Shop. 77% provided all the information with the claim, and the majority of people are satisfied with our service. The department that provides the best service from the customer's point of view is our Help Shops.

Reporting Changes of Circumstances: Please remember to keep us informed if you are aware of change of circumstances with your tenants. If you think there has been a change in the household composition, the tenant may have had a change of income or any circumstance that may affect the amount of Housing Benefit they are entitled to, please tell us. You can notify us of any changes by e mail to: benefits.enquiries@reigate-banstead.gov.uk

Fraud awareness: In previous newsletters, we have highlighted the types of fraud that we investigate, and the action that can be taken on a claimant if they commit fraud. As a Landlord are you aware that you also have a duty to notify the Benefits Department of any changes in your tenant's circumstances that you become aware of.

You may be asked to attend an interview under caution and Legal Proceedings may be taken against you if:-

- 1) You knowingly allow your tenant to continue claiming Housing Benefit which they may not be entitled to. Examples of this are:-
 - You are in receipt of direct payment from the Housing Benefits Department and have not notified a change as soon as you became aware of it, such as your tenant has vacated, their partner has moved in or out, they have started work or they are subletting.
 - You are aware that your tenant has provided false information to the benefit department and you do not tell us.
- 2) You provide false or misleading information to the Benefits Department.

To report benefit Fraud you can log on to the Council Website, call us on 01737 276483, email us on fraudstoppers@reigate-banstead.gov.uk or you can write to the Corporate Anti-Fraud Team at Reigate Town Hall, Castlefield Road, Reigate, Surrey, RH2 0SH.

Contacting us by e-mail: If you would like to contact us by e-mail with a query about a benefit claim, you can e-mail benefits.enquiries@reigate-banstead.gov.uk. Your e-mail will be forwarded to the relevant officer to reply to you.

If you have any queries or concerns regarding our service, or would like to set up regular liaison, please contact Louise Stone - telephone 01737 276491, e-mail louise.stone@reigate-banstead.gov.uk or alternatively, you can write to us at the Town Hall, Castlefield Road, Reigate, Surrey, RH2 0SH.

We send this newsletter out to landlords who have received direct payments in the previous 6 months. If for any reason you do not receive the quarterly newsletter, you will find it published on our website - www.reigate-banstead.gov.uk on the landlord pages.