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# Around the Houses

February 2014

'Around the Houses' is published monthly to showcase the excellent work members are doing in a wide variety of different areas. If you have any stories you'd like to include in the next edition, please send them to [bethan-samuel@chcymru.org.uk](mailto:bethan-samuel@chcymru.org.uk).

## New housing scheme boosts single bed living for North Wales Housing

A growing need for single bedroom accommodation, exacerbated further by the 'bedroom tax', has spurred on the development of a nine-home scheme in Llandudno. North Wales Housing has acquired a brownfield site and developed 9 one bed flats called 'The Stables'. Completion of 'The Stables' will help fulfil the growing need for one bed properties. The scheme has been developed to Sustainable Homes Code Level 3 with high levels of insulation, minimising energy consumption and reducing energy bills. Paul Diggory, Chief Executive, said: 'There is a clear demand for this type of property... We're looking at a number of other sites across North Wales where we can re-develop or build similar properties. We are making progress and have seen a reduction in the overall number of tenants under-occupying from 309 cases in April to 268 today. Those still under-occupying represent just over 10% of our overall current tenants. We are working closely with them to ensure that they are aware of the options available to them and that they have the best chance possible in paying their weekly shortfall in rent.'



## Landscape champions to look after their local areas

Clwyd Alyn residents are taking the lead in looking after the areas where they live, thanks to a new resident involvement initiative. Residents have set up a new group called 'Landscape Champions' so that they can have a direct input into landscape and gardening issues where they live. Gareth Hughes-Roberts, Community Involvement Officer for Clwyd Alyn, said: 'We believe that our residents should be at the heart of decisions taken which affect them, so we've set up a panel with representatives from our schemes across North and Mid Wales to link in with our landscape maintenance contractors. At the moment we've just held the first meeting for the first 'Landscape Champions' and we're hoping to involve volunteers from all our schemes in the future.' Dee Cooney who lives in Rhyl said: 'We all care about where we live and being a Landscape Champion means I can help improve the appearance of our schemes, through working closely with Clwyd Alyn and the Landscape Contractor, Ground Control. We can make a difference if we all work together.'

### Greenfield family benefits from WHP's 500th affordable home

A young family from Flintshire has ended its long search for a new home by becoming the 500th family to benefit from an innovative housing partnership. Thanks to the Welsh Housing Partnership, Jonny, Nicola and their one-year-old son Oscar will be handed the keys to a new three-bedroom property in Greenfield. The new home comes as a relief to Jonny and his family, who had struggled to find a new home before discovering the Welsh Government-backed initiative. Since forming in August 2011, the Welsh Housing Partnership has helped 500 low-income families, which would otherwise be unable to buy or rent a property, to find a new and affordable home. Made up of Coastal Group, Hendre Group, Seren Group and Cymdeithas Tai Clwyd, the Welsh Housing Partnership operates to buy affordable homes for people to rent. Welsh Government Minister for Housing and Regeneration Carl Sargeant was on hand to welcome the family to their new home, along with representatives from the Welsh Housing Partnership and Flintshire County Council. The Minister said: 'I am delighted to be here to wish Jonny and Nicola well as they move into their new home here in Greenfield. I must also congratulate the Welsh Housing Partnership as they reach the significant milestone of helping 500 families into affordable homes. The Partnership is an excellent example of collaborative working and I would like to thank everyone involved in delivering much needed affordable rented properties across Wales. I'm really pleased that the Welsh Government is supporting the Partnership and through it these new homes in Flintshire.' Welsh Housing Partnership represents an investment of £106m by the end of March 2015, including £21m from the Welsh Government and a further £79m in investment from private funders. The partnership will deliver more than 900 homes for low-income families to rent.



### £40m public money set to be wasted in Wales due to 'bedroom tax' impact

More than £40m of public money is set to be wasted in Wales due to the removal of the spare room subsidy from disabled people living in specially adapted properties, according to a report by Wales & West Housing. WWH has produced a report: 'Who Pays? -The Impact of the Removal of the Spare Room Subsidy on Disabled Residents living in Adapted Properties in Wales.' WWH is now campaigning for the spare room subsidy to be reinstated for disabled people living in properties which have been substantially adapted for their needs.

The key findings are as follows:

- Of the 779 WWH households assessed as under occupying, 74 live in homes that have been specifically adapted for their needs at an average cost of £7,700 each.
- Figures from 21 of the 22 LAs show that approximately 35,000 households in Wales have been affected by the removal of the spare room subsidy. If 10% of these are disabled households – as is the case with WWH - it is estimated that 3,500 disabled households with specific adaptations will have been similarly affected.
- It is therefore estimated that the total cost to the public purse in Wales of the removal of the spare room subsidy for disabled people in substantially adapted properties would be £40m (£25m having been spent on adaptations to existing properties, and £15m which would need to be spent on alterations needed to adapt new smaller homes, even if such properties became available).

Shayne Hembrow, Deputy Chief Executive and Commercial Director, Wales & West Housing, said: 'Our research shows that the removal of the spare room subsidy from disabled people living in adapted properties in Wales makes no financial sense whatsoever. The cost of new adaptations wipes out the potential savings in housing benefit for many years.'

### Cadwyn names Charity of the Year

Cadwyn HA has chosen Cardiff Food Bank as their charity of the year for 2014 following a staff vote. In 2012-13, food banks fed 346,992 people nationwide. Of those helped, 126,889 were children. Sarah Cole, Director of Finance at Cadwyn said, 'Rising costs of food and fuel combined with static income, high unemployment and changes to benefits are forcing more and more people to turn to food banks for help. We work with a number of extremely vulnerable people and have seen first-hand the great work that Cardiff Food Bank does in providing food parcels to families in need. It is such a valuable resource which is why we are proud to be supporting them this year.' Staff at Cadwyn will pledge their support to the charity by organising a number of events and fundraising activities throughout the year as well as operating a collection point where they will be able to donate food items.



### Encouraging older tenants to switch

Despite the fact that switching energy supplier can help reduce costs, there is still reluctance on the part of some households to engage with the competitive market. This is particularly true of older consumers. Newport Housing Trust aimed to change this through the Cyd Cymru scheme. NHT conducted their own questionnaire and found that 91% of respondents had not switched energy supplier within the past year. Through Cyd Cymru, NHT had the opportunity to change this. In order to promote Cyd Cymru, Newport Housing Trust utilised in-house resources and the expertise of EST to hold local events. Posters were sent to tenants promoting the events, and they allowed tenants to sign up to Cyd Cymru through a trusted source. Newport Housing Trust offered a £25 voucher for the tenant who saves the most money through switching, and through the campaign they are hoping that tenants continue to switch and embed energy switching into their behaviour in the future.

### CCHA first in Wales to pilot direct payments for tenants

Cardiff Community Housing Association (CCHA) is the first HA in Wales to voluntarily introduce direct payments of Housing Benefit to tenants in preparation for the introduction of Universal Credit (UC). The Direct Payment Pioneers pilot started in October 2013 and aims to assess the impact of direct payments in terms of if, when, and how tenants pay their rent and to test CCHA's internal systems and policies. 50 tenants meeting UC criteria were randomly selected to take part and the initial results have given CCHA an insight into the impact the changes will bring. These include increased arrears and transaction costs and a dramatic rise in staff contact with tenants. In the first month, only 52% of tenants paid their rent in full. By month three this had increased to 83%. This increase can be attributed to Housing Benefit being paid four weeks in arrears and suggests that tenants being transferred to UC will only start paying rent on receipt of their first payment, hence being a month in arrears from the start. CCHA tenants have a choice of nine payment methods, with eight being used by the pilot group. The most popular are Allpay terminals, payment at CCHA's community office, Direct Debit, and over the telephone. Paul Elliott, Financial Inclusion Officer, said: 'The results published by the DWP did not give us any clear indication of what the changes would mean for us and our tenants. Our results, coupled with feedback from tenants, have been invaluable in helping us to prepare to ensure we have the right support in place.' Two of the tenants selected for the pilot have had to 'switch-back' after informing CCHA that the Housing Benefit money had been used elsewhere – one to pay off an illegal money lender and one on meeting Christmas expenses. The pilot will be extended to more tenants and will continue indefinitely in order to further evaluate its impact on both tenants and the organisation.



### Celtic Horizons wins National Housing Maintenance Forum award

Celtic Horizons, the wholly-owned subsidiary of United Welsh, has won Project of the Year at the National Housing Maintenance Forum Awards. A spokesman for the Forum said: 'United Welsh developed an innovative model that reduces the tenants' journey, improves service delivery and introduces new concepts including the Complete Property Service, a creative lean working approach to improve efficiency and maximise resources.' The project is the first of its kind in Wales and was developed with Mears Group. Tenants had input throughout with a core group giving more than 400 hours of their time over two years. Steve Bowen, Procurement Project Manager, said: 'One of the most important parts of the process was the extensive tenant involvement that has continued beyond the launch and extended into many exciting areas for our tenants including our Community Judges. This has clearly paid off as customer satisfaction with the work of Celtic Horizons is at an all time high and continues to improve.'



### Park given new lease of life

A park in Cwmbran is being given a new lease of life, thanks to the efforts of local people and Bron Afon staff. Residents who live near Plas Twyn got together with staff from Bron Afon to consider options for long-term improvements. Paul Williams, Community Involvement Officer, said: 'Locals told us that the park is important to them... We gathered ideas to find out what they would like to see in the park and took them to a developer, who drew up possible layouts. We've secured funding and contributed ourselves to the first stages of developing the place the community asked for. This includes landscaping the site and providing a fence to properly enclose the site. We are hoping to support some of the families involved to help them set up a constituted group so that they can develop the park with us in the future.'

### Cancer charity gets a boost

A cancer charity has received over £2000 in donations from Grŵp Gwalia. Staff chose Cancer Research UK as their nominated charity for 2013, organising fundraising activities throughout the year. Dress-down days and cake sales took place and several staff from offices across Wales participated in the Race for Life. Staff raised £2386.34 over the year. Gwalia's Employee and Engagement Officer, Suzie Hughes said: 'Each year staff at Gwalia fundraise for a different charity of our choice. We nominated Cancer Research UK for 2013 as the charity is close to a lot of people's hearts and we've enjoyed fundraising throughout the year. Having so many of our staff participate in the Race For Life in the summer was inspiring and really helped with our fundraising efforts.' Cancer Research UK's Local Fundraising Manager for West Wales, Chris Roberts added: 'We are extremely grateful to all those who contributed towards this fantastic sum which will help us beat cancer sooner. Cancer Research UK pioneers life-saving research to bring forward the day when all cancers are cured.'

### No experience necessary!

A new garden in Tonteg is bringing people closer thanks to the hard work of tenants at RCT Homes' sheltered housing scheme, Summerdale Close. In recent years Summerdale Close's communal garden area, which overlooks playing fields in the centre of Tonteg, was being used less often by the residents. A group of tenants decided to apply for funding to turn the garden back in to a community feature. Despite a complete lack of gardening experience, tenants Ken, Richard and Byron planned a new layout and design for the garden and applied to RCT Homes' grant scheme for gardening tools, materials, plants and furniture. Over £3000 and three months later, the team has brought life back to the communal garden. Ken said: 'None of us were gardeners but we knew the garden had potential.'