

HELENA HEADLINES



SUMMER 2004

Rob Young
Chief Executive



Welcome to your first local edition of Helena Headlines. Since Helena Headlines was launched in December 2002 our customers have been very complimentary about its design and content. Some readers have asked if it would be possible for us to provide more local versions of the newsletter. We are responding to this by launching 6 local versions of Helena Headlines. Important information that affects all readers will be included in the six different versions of the newsletter. The remaining pages will be devoted to issues in your local area.

We hope you enjoy this special edition of Helena Headlines. The next edition will be mailed to homes in October.

Helena Housing Tenants' Conference 2004

Monday 27th September at the World of Glass

What do you think of Helena Housing and the services we offer to you, our tenants? Come along and have your say.

All tenants are welcome but you must book a place by calling the Tenant Participation Team on 01744 675678.



A session at last year's conference

Dear tenant

It is now just over two years since Helena Housing was formed after tenants voted overwhelmingly to transfer their Council homes into the Company's ownership. We have listened carefully over those two years to your views about our plans for Helena Housing. We have talked to tenant and resident groups, invited feedback via the phone, e-mail and text messaging and carried out a tenant satisfaction survey. We have also taken account of what you have told us in complaints and customer feedback. All this information is invaluable in giving us a picture of your priorities and how you want services to develop in the future.

You have said you would like us to focus on:

- Services that are easier to access
- Quicker decisions about things that affect you
- Staff who are helpful and have the right skills to respond to your needs
- A more proactive approach to providing services in your neighbourhood
- Taking action against tenants who create a nuisance, have untidy gardens or don't comply with their tenancy agreement
- Helping you enjoy your home peacefully and quietly
- Work with local communities to create pride in the neighbourhood

We have also listened to our other partners. These include the Housing Corporation who regulate us, our funders who lend us the money to improve our homes and our partners in St Helens including St Helens Council. Their views are equally important and we need to make sure that as we take Helena Housing forward we take our partners with us.

Their priorities are:

- The future financial viability of the Company
- Making the most of opportunities to grow the business
- Keeping our costs down as the number of homes we manage falls because of the high number of tenants buying their home through the right to buy scheme
- Improving performance in key areas like rent collection, empty properties and getting repairs done
- Working effectively with partners to tackle local issues
- Improving access to services particularly for disadvantaged groups

This special edition of Helena Headlines tells you about the practical changes you will see over the coming months to the services we provide in your area. I thought it would be useful to set out exactly what we are aiming to achieve through these changes, so that you can understand our aims and so you can tell us whether the changes have been effective in achieving these aims.

On the next page we have set out our priorities for the future, based on feedback from tenants and our partners.

Continued from page 1

Our priorities are:

To work with tenants for more peaceful neighbourhoods by:

- Taking action on untidy gardens, car parking problems and nuisance
- Working with the Police, the Council and other agencies to tackle problems

To work with local people to tackle local issues by:

- Developing local action plans and estate agreements
- Walking around estates with tenants groups to identify problems
- Taking action on wasteland and garage sites
- Tackling problems around shopping parades
- Maintaining grassed and planted areas
- Looking for opportunities to support vulnerable groups such as older people
- Working with young people to provide greater opportunities and tackle issues.

To improve customer care by:

- Better trained and better informed frontline staff
- Developing the Repairs Direct service
- More appointments in your own home
- Improved reception areas and confidential interview facilities
- More opportunities to give us feedback about the quality of our services

To reduce problems caused by empty properties by:

- Reducing the turnover of tenants
- Not boarding up empty properties where possible
- Tidying gardens
- Streamlining our procedures to relet empty properties more quickly

To improve the way properties are let by:

- Working with tenant and resident groups to agree local lettings arrangements
- Making it easier to apply for housing and be accepted onto the waiting list
- Working with new tenants to make sure tenancy agreements are understood and support is provided where necessary
- Reducing the number of refused offers of homes by prospective tenants
- Eliminating any potential discrimination in the lettings process



To provide a better repairs service by:

- Streamlining the way repairs are reported, diagnosed and actioned
- Developing an appointments system
- Training operatives to carry out a wider range of tasks
- Reducing the costs of administration for repairs
- Making better use of technology for people working out on site
- Improving the time it takes to complete a repair

To collect as much rent as possible by:

- Providing a range of new and more cost effective payment methods
- Reducing the number of tenants in arrears



Our first two years as a business have been focused on setting the foundations of our Company and making sure we are able to deliver our promises to tenants, funders and St Helens Council. We have taken a long, hard look at the way our services are organised and have made significant changes to better meet your needs and priorities and use your rent money as efficiently as we can.

The next phase of our development will be to look at:

- How we make best use of the various pockets of empty land we own across the borough
- How we work with older people to provide homes and services that better meet their needs
- Ensuring the financial success of the company by taking advantage of opportunities to grow our business
- Reducing the amount of tax we have to pay by becoming a charity

Thank you for your feedback so far. We have been encouraged by the positive comments we receive about the work we have done in our first two years. We will continue to consult you about the changes that affect you through Helena Headlines, tenants and residents groups, area committees and the tenants' conference. I hope you find this special edition of Helena Headlines of interest.

Rob Young
Chief Executive

NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES

Our new neighbourhood teams based in local offices have been set up to work with local people tackling local issues. The work of these teams is supported by the Anti-Nuisance Team, Housing Advice Centre and the Regeneration and Community Initiatives team which includes our well established Tenant Participation Team.

We have looked at the way services have been provided in the past and made some changes so that we are offering a better service to tenants.

Our aim is to:

Provide excellent locally accessible services

- Our staff will spend longer out and about on estates and pre-arranged home visits will be offered to tenants who contact us for advice and assistance.

Develop highly trained professional staff

- We are currently developing a new type of training programme for all our staff to ensure they are well-informed and provide a customer orientated service.

Improve housing and the physical environment

- The Improvement Programme is being delivered and neighbourhood staff will be completing reports for all our estates highlighting areas of concern.
- We carry out regular estate walkabouts with our recognised Tenants' Groups.
- Each Neighbourhood Office has a dedicated Estate Caretaker to ensure that communal areas are maintained and rubbish removed quickly to keep our estates clean.

Tackle crime and community safety

- We work closely with the Police and the Council's Safer Communities Team to tackle crime and anti-social behaviour on our estates. We welcome initiatives such as the recent drugs related Operation Gresty and will take follow up action, if appropriate, against tenants who are convicted of offences.

Improve health and employment opportunities

- We have developed a Regeneration Strategy which will help local people to gain employment and get involved in local health initiatives.

Be the partner of choice and champion local needs

- Work with partners such as Sure Start, Partners Credit Union and FUTURE to support local initiatives which offer training and employment to local people.

We hope you will soon feel the benefit of our new, neighbourhood focussed services. The name and contact details for the neighbourhood officer who deals with your area appears on the next page.



MAKING IT EASIER FOR YOU TO PAY

This Autumn, tenants who pay their rent at our cash counters will be sent payment swipe cards. These cards can be used at any Post Office.

All you have to do is take your card and your cash or cheque to the Post Office and your payment will be credited to your account. You will be given a receipt as proof of your payment.

The new arrangement with Post Offices gives you, our tenants, more choice and helps us collect rent and other payments more efficiently.

Tenants who have a Home Contents Insurance Scheme with us will be issued a separate payment card.

Do it with a debit

Save time by signing up to our brand new direct debit scheme. You will never have to leave home to pay your rent again. Plus you'll have peace of mind knowing that your rent is always paid on time.

You can pay your direct debit weekly or monthly. If you sign up to the monthly scheme you will have a choice of two dates to make your payment. These are the 8th and 23rd of the month. For people who prefer to pay weekly payments will be taken out every Friday.

Setting up a direct debit couldn't be easier. To qualify you must have a current bank account and be prepared to sign a mandate form. We will send you a confirmation that a direct debit has been set up on your rent account and details of how much and when the payments will be deducted. You can cancel at any time.

You can collect a form at your local neighbourhood office or call 01744 675712 or 675553 and we will fill in a form over the phone. You will need your bank account details to hand.





GETTING REPAIRS RIGHT FIRST TIME

After months of preparation and training, Repairs Direct was launched on 19th April 2004. This brand new, one stop service makes reporting repairs simpler and more efficient for customers.

When you telephone Repairs Direct you will be put through to a trained adviser who will ask you a series of questions to help us find out what needs doing, diagnose the problem and let you know long it will take for the repair to be carried out. This saves us time by sending out the right person who has the right skills and the right equipment to fix your repair first time.

We carry out monthly telephone based satisfaction surveys about the service. In May you told us:

92% found staff helpful

83% were satisfied or very satisfied with the length of time it took to complete the repair

83% were satisfied or very satisfied with the overall repairs service.

Repairs Direct have equipment to listen into calls between customers and staff, making sure that staff ask the right questions, provide clear information and are polite and helpful.



Repairs Direct is open between 9am and 5pm Monday to Friday and you can contact us -

By telephone - call 01744 63 73 83. All calls are charged at local rate.

In person - at your local office using the freephone in reception. Just pick up the phone and you will be put straight through to Repairs Direct without having to dial.

By email - repairs@helenahousing.co.uk

By letter - Repairs Direct, Helena Housing, 2 Lancots Lane, Sutton, WA9 3EX

In an emergency telephone us on 01744 637383. If you telephone outside of our opening hours you will be put straight through to our 24-hour emergency service.



SERVING THE COMMUNITY

Helena Headlines is now available on audio tape for those tenants who are blind or partially sighted. This invaluable service is provided by Liverpool Library Services to disabled people, giving blind tenants the opportunity to find out about all the things Helena Housing is doing for its tenants.

We now also take Response Centre calls through the RNID's Tynetalk, a special service which allows deaf, hard of hearing and speech impaired people to communicate by telephone. By dialling a special prefix number before

any phone number, the caller can relay his or her messages through an operator who intercepts the callers typed message, passes it back onto the person receiving the call, and then types back the response to the caller.

Helena Housing wants to make sure all tenants have equal access to the information and services it provides.

If you would like a copy of this newsletter or one of our new corporate leaflets in larger print, another language or on audio tape please contact:

Caroline Tubb, PR & Marketing Officer on 01744 675708.

PAYING YOUR RENT

From the beginning of June, rent collection has been dealt with by a specialist rents team rather than your local neighbourhood officer.

The team is split between two locations with the north of the borough being covered by the team based in Moss Bank and the team located at Sutton Fold covering the south of the borough.

Each area is covered by a different member of the team. They can help you with any rent queries or concerns that you may have. The details of your arrears officer and their contact telephone number appear in the middle pages of this newsletter.

You can also contact the team by email: rents@helenahousing.co.uk or by post:

South Rents Team	North Rents Team
Sutton Fold Technical Centre	70 Bowness Avenue
2 Lancots Lane	Moss Bank
St Helens	St Helens
WA9 3EX	WA11 7EQ

Pay and stay

Helena Housing provides good quality homes at affordable rents. In return we expect all our tenants to pay their rent promptly and in full.

Rent payment should be a top priority as non-payment can lead to the loss of your home. We will always work with customers who are experiencing financial difficulties to try and maximise their income and ensure any housing benefit entitlement is received.

Unfortunately we have to evict a small number of tenants every year who have failed to maintain their payments. This is a last resort and not something we want to do, but if people do not co-operate with us then we have no option but to take this course.

It is vital you contact us as early as possible if you are having problems paying your rent. The sooner you contact us the more manageable the rent arrears will be. We will treat all information in confidence, offer advice and make reasonable agreements to re-pay any arrears owed.



Remember – **To stay you need to pay**

Need help with Housing Benefits? Do you have debt problems?

We have a specialist welfare benefits adviser within the new rents team who is able to give detailed advice about housing benefits and other related welfare benefits that may be available.

If you are having any difficulty paying your rent you should contact your arrears officer straight away. If they cannot deal with your particular query the welfare benefits adviser will get involved, carry out a full assessment of your circumstances and advise on any way to make the most of your income.

Want Independent advice?

If you would rather speak to someone not employed by Helena Housing about any financial problems you may be experiencing then there are various ways you can do this.

The **Citizens Advice Bureau** is a free service and can offer independent, financial advice. You can find their telephone number in the local directory and ring them for an appointment.

Some **local solicitors** have specialist debt advice teams. Free advice may be available to those who qualify for legal aid, while some offer a free initial appointment. You can find a list of solicitors in the local telephone directory.

National debtline is a telephone helpline for people with debt problems. They offer expert advice over the telephone and send every caller an information pack free of charge. You can call them **free** on 0808 808 4000.



WANTED!



Volunteers to inspect our services!

Only our customers can tell us whether our services are up to scratch. Because of this we are keen to hear from tenants who are willing to get involved and become tenant inspectors.

We are particularly keen to involve tenants in the review of our:

- Office receptions
- Neighbourhood walkabouts
- Empty property standards
- Mystery shopping

Full training and support will be provided. For further information please contact Colin Ward, Head of Customer Services on 01744 675555 or email: colin.ward@helenahousing.co.uk



Satisfaction Survey

A big thank you to all of you that returned your satisfaction surveys. We had almost 3300 forms returned. This is a 26% response rate which is excellent for this type of survey.

The results of the survey are now being analysed and will be published in September's Helena Headlines. We will also be presenting the results to Helena's board, the Tenants Executive Committee, Area Committees, tenants meetings and at the tenants' conference in September.

These meetings will give us the opportunity to work together and plan our future work on the issues that you have said matter to you most.

Details and photos of the tenants who won the TV and video and £250 Argos vouchers for sending back their surveys will be featured in the Autumn Helena Headlines.

Feedback on Area Committees

Area Committees were introduced in November 2002 and are held every three months in four areas:

North Central South East

The meetings provide an opportunity to come and hear how Helena is delivering the improvement programme and neighbourhood services, find out how the company is performing and listen to our plans for the future.

You can have your say on the way we deliver services and have an input in our future plans. At recent meetings, we have discussed the format for our new series of information leaflets, the work of the anti-nuisance team and the year 3 improvement programme.

The four committees are open to all Helena tenants and dates and venues are advertised in the local press and neighbourhood offices. The next round of committees will be held in October. Please come along and give us your views. For more information contact the Tenant Participation Team on 01744 675678.

Contact Repairs Direct on the number below between 9 to 5, Monday to Friday. If you have an emergency repair out of our normal working hours please call the same number.



FOR GENERAL ENQUIRIES
ABOUT HELENA HOUSING CALL: 01744 675555

IF YOU WOULD LIKE A COPY OF THIS NEWSLETTER IN LARGER PRINT, ANOTHER LANGUAGE OR ON AUDIO TAPE PLEASE CONTACT:

CAROLINE TUBB, PR AND MARKETING OFFICER
TEL: 01744 675708 OR EMAIL:
enquiries@helenahousing.co.uk

The telephone numbers of our local neighbourhood offices are below:

Derbyshire Hill	01744 677000
Moss Bank	01744 677050
Thatto Heath	01744 677125
Newton	01744 677900
Sutton Fold	01744 671400
Duke Street	01744 675667

You can email general enquiries to:
enquiries@helenahousing.co.uk
You can email non emergency repairs to:
repairs@helenahousing.co.uk
Emergency out of hours number:
01744 637383