

Questions from Residents

Items from the East Residents Only Meeting 11/1/18

Rent and Council Tax payments

Tenants are no longer able to pay their rent and council tax at the Post Office. They have been told by the Post Office that this is because the council doesn't want to pay the necessary fee to the Post Office for this service.

This makes it very difficult for residents who live on very low incomes and manage their money weekly in cash. Many of these are pensioners who collect their pension from the Post Office each week and immediately make all their bill payments over the counter.

Other avenues for local cash payments have already been restricted with the closure of local housing offices and changes that mean people can no longer pay by cheque at the bank.

The only option for local cash payments is for people to go to shops that have a pay point, but it can be difficult for many residents to do this every week.

The council has said that they want people to pay by direct debit, but this makes it very difficult for those living on a tight budget to manage their finances and make sure they don't go into debt.

The meeting felt that these changes, which make it harder for people to pay their rent and council tax, increases the likelihood that people will fall behind in their rent and council tax payments, thus increasing the level of debt owed to the council.

Response: Lynn Yule, Housing Income Manager, Telephone: 01273 293240

Thank you very much for feeding back of tenants' concerns. In April 2015 the council transferred business from the Co-operative Bank to Lloyds Bank Plc. However, the council continued a separate bill payments account with the Co-operative Bank which enabled customers to make payments via the Post Office.

Unfortunately, the Co-operative Bank is removing their bill payments service and the council's contract is due to expire at the end of this month. As a result, Post Office payments were removed as a payment method option from 1 December 2017. Although customers are no longer able make payments through the Post Office, many Post Offices are located within shops which are PayPoint outlets. There are approximately 150 PayPoint outlets in the Brighton & Hove area,

still enabling residents to make their rent payments when collecting their money from the Post Office, or buying their groceries.

For those customers who have a transactional bank account there are alternative payment methods to PayPoint and direct debit:

- By debit card online using our secure server
- By bank standing order
- By telephone ~ 01273 291908 24 hours a day

For those tenants who do not have a transactional bank account and manage their money weekly in cash, while cash payments should not be sent by post, payment can be made by postal order and sent to:

Housing Centre
Unit 1
Fairway Trading Estate
Eastergate Road
Brighton
BN2 4QL

Any individual tenant experiencing difficulty can contact the Housing Customer Service Team on 01273-293030 where colleagues will be more than happy to help and to talk through suitable individually tailored solutions.

Laundry tokens

The shift to token payments for laundries has been difficult for a lot of residents. This is even more difficult because the tokens are often not available at council offices, such as Lavender Street, so people have to go all the way into town to Jubilee Library.

The meeting felt that this happens because the tokens are not emptied out of the machines and re-distributed often enough.

Response: Hilary Edgar, Housing Service Operations Manager, Telephone: 01273 293250

Thank you for raising the difficulty that some residents are experiencing in accessing laundry tokens as part of our new laundry contract.

We recognise the fact machines will only take tokens is inconvenient for some residents, and apologise for this. The machines were initially going to take cash. However on visiting the sites and listening to tenants concerns regarding vandalism and breakdowns due to thefts or attempted thefts, we have renegotiated with the supplier to not have cash on any of the sites.

Tokens are available for purchase at the following libraries during hours they are staffed – Jubilee, Whitehawk, Moulsecoomb and Hove.

We are exploring the option of token machines that can be fitted in nearby locations to individual blocks to make it easier for residents to purchase tokens. We have recently made a trial arrangement with the local convenience store in North Whitehawk for it to sell both washer and dryer tokens and, if successful, we will try to make similar agreements with other local stores where this helps residents.

We have again emptied the machines recently, and are finding only small numbers of tokens in them. Our own analysis is that the reason some locations are running out of tokens is because of the high numbers that have been purchased in batches. We understand that this is because some residents associations have made bulk purchases on behalf of tenants – because of the difficulties you have expressed in terms of getting to a library. While this is very helpful for some residents, it has also depleted stocks of both washer and dryer tokens very quickly.

We hope that once we're able to arrange for token machines in nearby locations, or local shops to sell the tokens, then access will be very much easier for residents. In the meantime, we are very grateful to our library colleagues for helping with the tokens and ensuring that we have been able to keep the laundrettes open without having cash on the premises.

Parking in Craven Vale/Parking General

The new parking zone has been very successful in Craven Vale but only covers highways land. There are also parking bays on Housing land and the situation is very muddled. People are not clear which parking bays belong to Housing or Highways and the signs / road markings aren't clear.

Some of the Housing parking bays are hidden away and are not monitored, so people are using them for free parking.

Other bays are paid for by tenants, but often used by other people, so the tenants can't use them. There is a 24 hour helpline for tenants to call if somebody else is in their parking bay, but as this isn't based locally it doesn't allow for effective action to be taken.

In other parts of the estate parking bays are left vacant, because people don't know if they can use them, whilst cars are crammed into the surrounding areas. There is also a problem with the Housing parking bays in Robert Lodge not being monitored.

There were two action points arising from this item:

Craven Vale Residents Association have invited Benjamin Tedder, the Housing Department Officer responsible for parking, to come to their meeting to try and resolve their specific problems.

It was agreed to put the issue of parking bays on Housing land forward to the agenda setting meeting for discussion at the Area Panel. Clarification is requested on: What procedures are in place to monitor parking bays on Housing land to ensure that they are only being used by the tenants that are paying for them? When tenants are unable to use the parking bay they are paying for, because someone else is parked there, what options are open to them to resolve the matter?

Response: Benjamin Tedder, Performance & Improvement Officer, Car Parks & Garages, Telephone: 01273 294503

The on-street parking scheme covers almost all of the roads on the Craven Vale Estate, which are located on Highways land. The only exception to this being two parking areas on Housing land which, though separate, connect with the Highway areas.

The different categories of land have different regulations regarding parking. I appreciate this can be confusing for residents who simply want to park. We aim to make it as easy as possible for residents to use these schemes by working with colleagues in the corporate parking team to coordinate our work in areas that have a mixture of land types and by using clear signage and road markings.

When on street parking was introduced in Craven Vale, we planned to introduce parking enforcement on Housing land at the same time. This was to ensure that residents could secure parking bays close to their homes and that the bays on Housing land weren't used as a free alternative to on street parking. Unfortunately,

there were scheduling and weather-related problems with the lining work at Craven Vale, which meant that the Housing parking areas were not as clearly defined as intended when enforcement began. This has now been rectified and all Housing bays are marked clearly with individual numbers – different to the on-street spaces. There is also separate signage for these spaces; which explains how they can be used by authorised persons only.

In terms of the ongoing monitoring of Housing's parking bays, we have a contract with One Parking Solution who can issue tickets to all improperly parked vehicles. Their operatives work throughout the day, the night and on weekends to provide parking enforcement patrols. Any vehicles parked in a licensee's bay can be reported to One Parking Solution on 01903 692966. If this is within office hours, the control room will send out an operative to issue a Parking Charge Notice for the vehicle that is wrongly parked. Licensees can also call the Housing Customer Services Team on 01273 293030 and will be offered the nearest available car parking space for them to use while the offending vehicle is blocking their space.

If this is not within office hours, reports can still be made to One Parking Solution on the number above. This will lead to a message being sent to the nearest operative who is patrolling to attend and ticket a vehicle. If an operative is unable to attend in time, a text log of repeat offender vehicles is still kept so that these can be targeted when an operative can next attend.

The Customer Services Team are unavailable to offer an alternative space to licensees outside office hours. During this time, licensees must park outside of the Housing parking areas to avoid being ticketed.

I am happy to attend a Craven Vale Residents' Association meeting to discuss any outstanding problems and to other meetings where residents are interested in parking enforcement, to discuss how our scheme works and the benefits it can bring to areas where parking is difficult.

Items from the Central Residents Only meeting 4/1/18

Defunct cables and aerials

There is an on-going problem with a lot of defunct cables on the outside of blocks of flats. These come loose, blow around in the wind, and drop across people's windows.

It was noted that this is a city-wide problem, and that the Council need to be pressed to take some action to sort it out. Raising the issue locally through Residents Associations is not getting any results.

Response: Glyn Huelin, Business & Performance Manager, Property & Investment, Telephone: 01273 293306

Thank you for your enquiry, I understand this is an issue across the city and the effect that this has on residents.

In some cases cables are the responsibility of the council and in some cases they belong to suppliers. The council are usually responsible for cables when there is a communal aerial system. In these cases we will arrange for our contractors to attend and re-fix and tidy the cabling.

The majority of cables causing issues in council blocks belong to the suppliers and we would encourage residents to contact their suppliers to address any issues with cabling.

We will work with residents and their associations as far as we can to support the resolution of any problems and we are currently working with the Bates Estate TRA along with Virgin to help resolve the issues on their estate.

<p>Items from the West Resident Association Meeting 9/1/18</p>

How to keep the repairs service working well

Concerns were raised about increased staff turn-over at Mears and inefficient repairs.

The meeting agreed that a high quality, efficient and effective service was a top priority for tenants. There were concerns that the quality of the repairs service will deteriorate as the council comes to the end of the contract with Mears in 2020; staff will look for jobs elsewhere and there may be less incentive to provide a good service.

It was agreed to flag up this concern and start a citywide discussion with the council about how tenants can feed back problems and contribute constructively to ensuring the contract is kept up to scratch over its final two years.

Response: Glyn Huelin, Business & Performance Manager, Property & Investment, Telephone: 01273 293306

Thank you for your comments and we completely understand your concerns.

The repairs contract with Mears comes to an end in March 2020 and work is now underway to begin considering options for this service in the future. We will be talking to residents at a future Area Panel, and we will involve residents in the consideration of options and the design of future contracts.

In terms of the existing contracts, these will continue to be managed through the Core Group which included five residents nominated by the Home Service Improvement Group (SIG) alongside senior managers from both the council and Mears. I encourage residents to share any concerns with the Home SIG, and these residents will be able to raise them at the Core Group. The Core Group will also develop and hold an action plan to manage the final years of the contract effectively.

In addition, the council works closely with Mears across a number of operations meetings and will continue to keep, Mears resources, performance and contract arrangements under close review as we enter the final two years of the contract.

Although the current contract will end in 2020, many contractor staff will have their employment and terms and conditions protected under legislation and would continue to work on any future contracts.

Items from the North Residents Only Meeting 18/1/18
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Installation of digital central heating thermostats

A tenant reported that K&T Heating are supplying residents with wireless digital central heating thermostats, but engineers have not received training in how to connect them to the boiler. Therefore, the wireless connection from the thermostat to the boiler is not being activated.

The tenant gave the example of her home. She had a new thermostat, but after the engineer left she was unable to turn her boiler off with the wireless thermostat.

She phoned Mears on a Friday to report the problem. This was not an emergency repair so K&T Heating did not come out until the following Wednesday. In the meantime she had to turn her boiler off manually as the house was getting hotter and hotter.

The engineer who attended could not resolve the problem, so it was reported again and a different engineer came out the following Monday. He said that the thermostat was faulty and replaced it. However, the problem persisted and the temperature in the house went up to 29°C.

Luckily, British Gas then came out to fit a new meter and explained that the wireless connection between the thermostat and the boiler had not been activated. They resolved the problem and the thermostat then worked fine.

Confirmation is requested that K&T heating engineers will all be trained in the installation of the new wireless digital thermostats.

Response: Nick Butler, K&T Heating, Branch Manager, Telephone: 01273 571521

I am sorry to hear about this tenant's experience. The digital thermostat used, comes pre-set by the manufacturers and is activated by the fully trained and qualified engineer after fitment. It cannot then be re-activated or altered. Brighton & Hove City Council, K&T Heating and the thermostat manufacture are aware that a few have developed a fault after fitment and testing. The manufacturer is supplying replacements however the thermostats have no serial number or any information to determine which units are affected. A faulty unit can only be identified if and when it fails so all heating engineers have been issued extra stock of the units to ensure a faulty unit is replaced as soon as it has been identified.

Repairs and problems with thermostats should be reported by calling the 24 hour Repairs Helpdesk on freephone 0800 052 6140 or our local number 01273 294409, or email us at BHCC.repairs@mearsgroup.co.uk

K&T Heating Out of Hours repairs service

The meeting felt that K&T Heating are not ensuring their out-of-hours staff are competent to carry out emergency repairs

An elderly resident in Moulsecoomb reported that water was running down the wall from their boiler on 29th December 2017. A K&T engineer came out, but said he only installed boilers and couldn't repair them. The tenant therefore had to wait until 3rd January for another engineer to come out. In the meantime, the tenant had to turn their boiler off and was without heat or hot water for 5 days.

This is in contravention of the Repairs and Improvements Handbook, which states: "An emergency repair will be completed within 24 hours.... Examples include...no heating or hot water from boiler (November to April only)".

It is requested that K&T Heating advise what action they are taking to ensure that staff carrying out emergency repairs are competent to carry them out.

Response: Nick Butler, K&T Heating, Branch Manager, Telephone: 01273 571521

Thank you for raising this matter. Only fully qualified repair engineers attend day to day and out of hour's repairs. All repair engineers are issued with a van stock of replacement heating components. Van stocks are continuously monitored and updated to ensure they include the most commonly used parts to ensure a first time fix. The enquiry states that the repair was reported over the Christmas period. If a replacement part was required that is not part of the van stock a repair may not have been possible due to supply chains being closed over the festive period. The appliance would have been made safe and temporary heating issued to the resident until the repair could be completed. The repairs and improvement handbook states "An emergency repair is one which needs to be carried out quickly to avoid danger to you or serious damage to the building. An emergency repair will be attended to within 24 hours so please be available to give access". All emergency repairs are attended to within 24 hours and 99% of these repairs are completed on the first visit.

