Welcome

Welcome to the May issue of Cheshire East’s Landlords Newsletter.

We are pleased to announce that we have a new Private Sector Liaison Officer in the team. John Jinks started in the post in January 2014.

Many of you will already know John from when he was Tenancy Support Officer based in Crewe. John has many years experience within housing and has already had a very positive impact in the Crewe and surrounding areas.

John is working with landlords and letting agents in the Crewe, Sandbach, Middlewich, Alsager, Church Lawton and Rode Heath areas and is happy to assist landlords who are already involved with our Bond scheme as well as work with new landlords through our Bond Scheme.

Whilst Housing Benefit is in payment we are still able to arrange direct payments to landlords who take tenants who are eligible for the Council’s Deposit Gaurantee Scheme (Bond).

Diane and John Private Sector Liaison Officers

John Jinks can be contacted on 01625 378230
E-mail: john.jinks@cheshireeast.gov.uk

and Diane can be contacted on 01625 378207.
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**Let’s Get Ready for Universal Credit!**

For some time now we have been expecting Universal Credit to be introduced in this area. Our neighbours in Warrington, Oldham and Wigan were pathfinders in April 2013 and it was rolled out in various areas throughout the country last year. The gradual roll out has enabled other authorities to learn from their experiences and prepare for what has always been an inevitable change. It has now been announced that from July 2014 Cheshire East will see the first new claims for Universal Credit. This will begin for **new, single** claimants making claims at Wilmslow, Congleton and Crewe Job Centre plus offices.

We must emphasize that this first phase of introducing Universal Credit will only be for single people or couples making a new claim. Consequently, if you have existing tenants who are already in receipt of Housing Benefit they will not be affected in the first wave and they may not transfer to Universal Credit until 2017.

**What is Universal Credit?**

Universal Credit is a new benefit replacing 6 existing benefits with a single monthly payment into claimant’s bank accounts. The aim is to assist customers through Universal Credit to be better off by working, getting a new job or working more hours. It is hoped that it will be easier for those who move in and out of work who experience problems with benefit stopping and starting.

It will replace:

- Income-based Jobseeker’s Allowance
- Income-related Employment and Support Allowance
- Income Support
- Working Tax Credit
- Child Tax Credit
- Housing Benefit

Universal Credit will be paid to people over 18 and under pensionable age.

**Alternative Payment Arrangements**

Alternative Payment Arrangements will be available to claimants who need additional support: These are also known as Payment Exceptions and can help by making more frequent payments, paying housing cost element (rent) as a “managed payment” to landlords or splitting CU payment between partners.

The decision as to whether Alternative Payment Arrangement is appropriate needs to be made by a Universal Credit Decision Maker who will consider evidence and financial factors.

They will consider a number of issues such as:

- Drug/alcohol issues or addictions
- Learning difficulties including numeracy or literacy problems
- Severe/multiple debt problems
- Homelessness
- Issues around domestic or other abuse
- Current rent arrears and threat of eviction.

All claimants who have been considered for Alternative Payment Arrangement will be referred to the Local Authority for Money Advice and we will be looking to engage with landlords of tenants who require this support.
What happens if my tenant is in arrears?

Whilst it is expected that most tenants will be able to manage their own household bills and keep up to date with their rent some will require extra support and alternative payment arrangements including managed payment of the housing element (rent) to the landlord will be considered on a case by case basis.

When a claimant has accumulated one month’s rent arrears due to persistent underpayment the Department of Work and Pensions can make an early intervention reviewing the financial support needed and make “managed payments” to landlord if appropriate. If two month’s rent arrears has accrued the rent element can be paid to landlord and if requested take steps to recover rent arrears through deductions from ongoing UC payments.

Landlords will need to contact UC if either of the two scenarios above are applicable to their tenant please use this link to learn more https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/266513/g12-2013-appendix-a.pdf

The Private Sector Liaison Officers will be working tirelessly to assist landlords of those tenants we have helped into the private sector and the tenants who are affected by the changes. However we are heartened by the option for a landlord to request recovery of arrears through future benefit payments.

As mentioned above we are looking to improve the offer we make to accredited landlords who use Cheshire East Council’s Bond scheme in line with the introduction of Universal Credit. This improvement will see us cover 2 month’s deposit on behalf of the tenant. We are also pleased to hear that those requesting Alternative Payment arrangements when they claim Universal Credit will be referred to the Council for money advice. This will help us identify private sector tenants in need specialist help.

Finally we are offering to pay the initial membership fee for members wanting a Credit Union Jam Jar Account who are placed using our Bond Scheme.

Cheshire Neighbours’ Jam Jar Accounts for rent direct.

Cheshire Neighbours Credit Union is gearing up for the launch of universal credit with the launch of Rent Direct and Jam Jar accounts for members.

Rent Direct Account;

A cost effective budget and collection service for both landlords and tenants.

Rent Direct is a streamlined payment service for landlords with all monies going directly to the tenant's credit union account via the normal banking system

For the tenant, Rent Direct is a fast, reliable and easy way to budget for rent payments ensuring rent payments are made on time directly to the landlord

Rent Direct also encourages regular budgeting avoiding the temptation to overspend, reducing arrears and ultimately, eviction rates

All Rent Direct payments are made directly into the Landlord’s banking account improving cash flow and reducing lapse rates
**Enhanced Service for our landlords**

Cheshire East are exploring the options for an Enhanced Service for Accredited Landlords With the aim to reduce void times on properties to let. We have yet to finalise details but are looking at the following:

- Free advertising on Cheshire Home Choice with a monthly viewing of approximately 15,000 tenants.
- Double Bonds. (Tenancy Deposit Scheme)
- Fast track of Housing Benefit claims and assistance with claiming Universal Credit for those affected.
- Budgeting advice
- Affordability check.
- Quarterly tenancy sustainability checks
- Free Inventories
- Free membership to Credit Union for tenants requiring Jam Jar Accounts
- Landlords pack.
- Use of professional tenancy agreements and notices.
- Landlord Support and guidance on a number of issues such as serving notice.

We will be offering a range of incentives to landlords who fully meet the criteria for working in partnership with the Council to help households in housing need. At the moment some of this service is provided for most landlords however with the introduction of an enhanced service to accredited landlords it may become necessary to introduce a tiered advice service to ensure that we are able to provide an excellent service to landlords who are working collaboratively with the Council.

As soon as the new offer has been developed we will contact you as we are keen to hear your feedback on our new and improved service offer.

**At a glance contact details**

PSLO Crewe: John Jinks 01625 378230  
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PSLO Macclesfield: Diane Cummings 01625 378207  
[Diane.cummings@cheshireeast.gov.uk](mailto:Diane.cummings@cheshireeast.gov.uk)

Cheshire Home Choice: 0300 123 5017 Option 1

Housing Benefits 0300 123 5013  
[benefitsce@cheshireeast.gov.uk](mailto:benefitsce@cheshireeast.gov.uk)

Money Adviser: Cath Driffield 01625 378058

Landlord Accreditation 0300 123 5017 Option 4  
[http://www.cheshireeast.gov.uk/housing/private_sector_housing/pr](http://www.cheshireeast.gov.uk/housing/private_sector_housing/private_rented_homes/landlord_accreditation.aspx)

Planning Enquiries: 0300 123 5014