

unity

customer magazine

Plus Dane Housing

Issue 41 Spring 2022

inside:



Universal
Credit changes
**you could
qualify**

**what you
think**
customer
survey results

welcome to the spring edition of **unity** magazine

Inside you'll be able to read about our new executive management team, and how changes to our customer scrutiny panel, among other things, mean your voice is as important to us as ever.

We continue to live in uncertain times. The pandemic is still with us, and cost of living rises are a worry for us all. This issue we are including some tips to make your money go further as well as signposting ways that we, and our partner organisations, can help if you are struggling. We hope you find the information in Unity useful, and if there's anything you'd like to see featured in the magazine, let us know at communications@plusdane.co.uk

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We continue to follow the latest government advice to keep you safe.

Don't forget, check out our website www.plusdane.co.uk for the latest updates and any changes to our services.

Our offices are still closed to customers who don't have an appointment.

A message from the chair of our Board



We wrote to you last month to let you know about the annual rent increase that is applied from 1 April. We very much realise that this comes at a time when many other costs are rising for you. Other housing associations in Cheshire and Merseyside are having to make similar increases.

Board members discussed at length the impact of the rent increase on our customers. We had to balance this against the need to continue to provide decent homes and vital services, but with the costs of labour and materials rising significantly. We are making difficult decisions to try and make savings in some areas, that will allow us to keep increases like this to a minimum while also delivering the best possible service and support for customers.

Rent is our main source of income, paying for services such as repairs, keeping homes safe through annual gas safety checks, electrical testing, and fire risk assessments in multiple occupancy buildings. It also funds our investment programme which includes replacement kitchens and bathrooms, windows and doors, and the longer-term requirements such as making our homes more energy efficient. This is on top of building new homes for families in great need.

Over the last two years, we have increased our support to those customers going through difficult times, particularly those disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. We want to build upon this, and we are looking at what more we can do to support our residents.

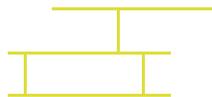
If you are facing hard times and worried about paying your rent, please get in touch with us and we will do all we can to provide help and advice working with other charities and local organisations who understand how hard all these additional costs are for people already struggling.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Peter Fahy".

Sir Peter Fahy, Chair,
Plus Dane Housing

Sir Peter Fahy was a police officer for 34 years, including five years as Chief Constable of Cheshire Constabulary and seven as Chief Constable of Greater Manchester Police.





UC *Universal Credit* migration

Did you know that the government recently made changes to Universal Credit so that more people can qualify for it?

Even if you are in work and have previously thought you might not be entitled, it is **worth looking again** to see if you could benefit now.

Once you earn more than your work allowance, your Universal Credit payments will be reduced at a steady rate, known as the Universal Credit earnings taper.

We know it can be confusing, but our dedicated Welfare Team are here to help you with any benefits or income queries you may have. You can contact them by calling **0800 169 2988** or by email at: welfare.team@plusdane.co.uk

From April, the Government will be resuming its 'managed migration' plans to move everyone who receives benefits on to Universal Credit.

This affects people who still get 'legacy benefits' such as Jobseekers Allowance, Housing Benefit and Income Support. Universal Credit has now replaced all of these for anyone making a new claim.

Managed migration had not long started before the pandemic put things on hold. It is expected to take about four years to complete, so if this affects you, you might not hear anything for a while.

The DWP will write to you when they want to move you to Universal Credit, telling you what you need to do.

If your Universal Credit entitlement is less than your entitlement to legacy benefits, you will receive a 'transitional amount' to top up.

You can ask to be transferred if you want to, but it is important to get benefit advice or **use an online benefit calculator first** to check how to claim and what you are entitled to, as you might not get any transitional protection if you choose to move.

See the government website at www.gov.uk/benefits-calculators for more information.

help with your energy bills

The sharp rise in energy prices coming in April is likely to affect everyone in some way.

If you find yourself in arrears with your energy supplier you might be able to get a grant to help pay it off. The following suppliers offer grants to their customers – take a look on their websites for more details on how to apply:

- British Gas Energy Trust
- Scottish Power Hardship Fund
- Ovo Energy Fund
- E.ON Energy Fund
- E.ON Next Energy Fund
- EDF Energy Customer Support Fund
- Bulb Energy Fund



If you can't get a grant from your supplier, check if you can get a grant from the British Gas Energy Trust. These grants are available to anyone - you don't have to be a British Gas customer.

Visit www.britishgasenergytrust.org, or **contact our Welfare Team who can help.**

Government support includes the Energy Bills Rebate

An upfront £200 discount on their bills from October. The discount will then be automatically recovered from people's bills in equal £40 instalments over the next five years. This will begin from 2023, when global wholesale gas prices are expected to come down.

Households in England in council tax bands A-D, will also receive a £150 rebate. The rebate to bills will be made directly by local authorities from April and will not need to be repaid.

We are able to refer customers struggling with their finances to RAISE, an independent charity that provides free, confidential, high-quality advice on welfare benefits, debt, and money issues.

Contact us or visit www.raiseadvice.org.uk to find out more





introducing our executive team



In the last Unity, we announced the appointment of two new members of our executive management team.

Alongside chief executive **Ian Reed**, we now have chief operating officer **Paul Knight** and deputy chief executive **Claire Ryan**.

Paul was formerly our interim executive director of neighbourhoods, and his career in social housing spans more than 30 years. He has held leadership roles in Your Housing Group and Chester and District Housing Trust as well as interim executive roles. He will be responsible for our customer-facing teams like housing and customer access.

Claire actually started her career at CDS Housing, one of the original organisations that joined together to become Plus Dane, and has returned to us from an executive role with another Merseyside housing association. Claire will oversee our Finance, Development, IT, Performance, and Governance teams.



Our new top team

Will now **work to deliver** on our corporate plan to provide **value for money** and an **improved service** for our customers, as well as **future-proofing the organisation** against the challenges we all face **as we come out of the pandemic.**





listening to you - our survey results

Over the past few months we have been looking at how we can improve the way we listen to you to help us focus on the things that matter most.

Back in November we sent customers a survey asking you about the types of things you would like to have a say on in the future, and how you'd prefer to do it. We received responses from over 1,000 of you – here are some of the highlights from your feedback.

51
percent

of you told us you'd want to speak to a member of Plus Dane staff about what areas of our service work well, and which ones don't, while 47% of you said that you would be happy to join Plus Dane Voices and complete a survey instead.

90
percent

of you expressed an interest in getting more involved by joining the Customer Scrutiny Panel, while the majority of you said that you would be happy to complete surveys from time to time.

TOP
3

The top three things that you wanted more influence over were repairs and maintenance, improvements to your home and supporting older and vulnerable customers. You also said you wanted to be more involved in the setting of service standards and any issues affecting your neighbourhood.

66
percent

of you would like us to introduce more digital ways to bring customers together to share feedback collectively.

67
percent

of you told us that the best way for us to tell you how we have acted on your feedback was to share it on our website.

28
percent

of you said that you wanted Plus Dane to share real examples of how we have listened to customers, and of changes we have made to services.



Plus Dane Voices



In January, we asked our **Plus Dane Voices** what matters most to them. These are the top five areas

1. **That we listen and take notice**
2. **How warm homes are and how efficient they are to heat**
3. **That the rent you pay provides good value for money**
4. **Making sure homes are of a decent standard, as well as having an efficient and quality repairs service**
5. **Making sure complaints are handled promptly and effectively**

Our next step is to consider your feedback from both surveys and share with you our new customer voice strategy that sets out how we will listen to you and improve services based

on what we hear. Now we know what matters most to you we want to engage you further on the best way to share information – we will be setting up a small working group of customers to advise us on this.

If you didn't get a chance to complete either of the surveys and wanted to tell us what you think, there is still time. Or, if you want to find out about joining Plus Dane Voices or the new working group please contact us on:

engagement&partnerships@plusdane.co.uk
or **0800 16902988** and ask to speak to a member of the **Engagement Team**.

the Plus Dane Customer Assurance Panel

Hearing what our customers think is part of how we work at Plus Dane. We have different ways that you can let us know what you think and over 2,200 of you are signed up to Plus Dane Voices where we ask your opinions on how we do things. This is really valuable information and is taken into account when we are making decisions. Most recently we have asked you what matters most to you and how you want your voices to be heard.

As well as **Plus Dane Voices** we have our **Scrutiny Panel**, a small group of customers who work with us to look at the detail of services and to make recommendations for improvement. **Over the last six years** the Scrutiny Panel has made around 100 recommendations of things we can do better. Here at Plus Dane we are **always looking to improve** and so very soon the Scrutiny Panel will be replaced by a customer panel who will look at a much wider set of information and will **make sure that our Board hear what customers have to say.**

We are about to launch the **Plus Dane Customer Assurance Panel (PDCAP)** which will

take the place of the Scrutiny Panel. When we asked Plus Dane Voices about how you want us to hear your voice, 90 customers said that they are interested in being part of the Scrutiny Panel. We will shortly be contacting these 90 people to speak to them in more detail about the PDCAP. If you are one of those 90 customers then you will hear from us soon.

In the next edition we hope to introduce the new panel to you and let you know what they will be doing first. **If you haven't already let us know and are interested in being part of this panel (the commitment is a minimum of six meetings a year) or you want to be part of Plus Dane Voices then please email:**

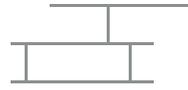
engagement&partnerships@plusdane.co.uk

2,200

of you are signed up to Plus Dane Voices where we ask your opinions on how we do things



energy saving tips



There are things you can do around the home to save energy and reduce your bills. If you aren't doing them already, why not try:

Turning down the heating – an easy but effective start. For each degree you cut the thermostat, a typical home can cut bills by an average of £65 a year. 18 degrees should be warm enough for adults – a little bit more for young children or older people

The Energy Saving Trust recommends **turning lights off when you leave the room**, no matter how long for. **This could save £14 a year.**

If you use a washing machine or dish washer, make sure they are full.

Block draughty windows and doors!

Homemade draft excluders, rolled-up towels, and even cling film on the windows can help with this.

Take shorter showers when you can – and less baths.

Use your washing machine and tumble dryer less, if you have them. A tumble dryer is one of the most expensive appliances to run in the home.

Don't overfill your kettle – only boil as much water as you need.

Visit www.getwaterfit.co.uk, do their quiz and get personalised advice to save water and money.



Energy saving light bulbs use around 80% less electricity and will last five times longer than the old halogen lightbulbs, according to gov.uk.

Using a slow cooker or microwave rather than the oven or hob **can keep cooking costs lower.**

If you're 74 or older and you or your partner receive pension credit, you can **apply for a free TV licence.** *(This used to be free to all over-75s, but is now only available for those claiming this benefit.)*



If you're struggling to pay your council tax bill, contact your local council as soon as possible.

You might be able to **spread your payments over 12 months**, rather than 10, or **you might be granted a one-off discount** if you still can't pay the balance.





waiting times for repairs



Our repairs service is currently in high demand, so we've made some changes to how we deliver

the service in light of some of the challenges we are facing.

This includes the national shortage of materials needed to complete some repairs - so for this reason, we are **extending the completion times for complex and major repairs**, as these are most likely to be affected.

We'll continue to **prioritise emergency and urgent repairs**, and aim to **respond to emergencies within four hours to make the situation safe**. These are where an issue could impact on your safety or that of your home. If the repair is not able to be completed in the initial visit, we will make arrangements to return to complete it.

Complex and major repairs are those that take a longer time to complete and may need multiple tradespeople. These are the types of repairs where we are experiencing shortages in availability of materials, so in order to provide you with an appointment time we know we are able to commit to, we are **extending the timeframe** for completion of these jobs to **90 days**. Repairs that would normally fall into this category include **larger plastering jobs, external pointing or rendering, internal door replacements, vinyl floor replacement and gutter leaks**, amongst others.

There are currently no changes to our response times for routine repairs, as they can be carried out within our normal timescales and are not affected by availability of materials at the moment. These include re-fixing loose tiling to floors and walls and minor plumbing leaks. **If you have a routine repair, we would expect to complete this within 28 days.**

For more information and to stay up to date with any changes we're making, be sure to visit our website at www.plusdane.co.uk.



our complaints process



safety in the home

gas and electrical safety - let us in to check



Allowing us into your home to do these checks is so important, and is a part of your tenancy agreement.



As your landlord, we need to make regular checks of the gas and electric systems in your home.

These checks are important in helping to prevent incidents like fires, electric shocks, gas explosions and leaks that can be dangerous for your family and your home – maybe even fatal.

They are part of your tenancy agreement and something we need to do by law. If we can't get in to do the work, we may end up having to go through the courts to gain access - although this is always a last resort.

When it's time for your home to be checked, we will send you a letter with a date and time (morning or afternoon) for you to be there to let us in. If you can't make the date, let us know so we can come another time.

In the meantime, if you are concerned about the electrics or gas in your home, get in touch with us.

You should never try and do electrical jobs yourself. Allowing us to do regular checks is the best way to be sure that things are safe, and to spot potential problems before it is too late.

When Plus Dane colleagues visit your home, we will still maintain social distance, clean the areas we work in, and wear PPE.



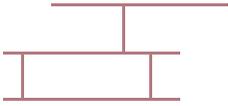
organisations we work with

After your gas or electrical check, you may be contacted by an organisation we use to check the work has been completed to the proper standards.

They are called Morgan Lambert, and they get in touch with a small, random selection of our customers to make sure we are doing things right and you are happy with the service received. This feedback is very useful to us and helps us to do better.

If you have any concerns about the identity of any organisations contacting you on our behalf, let us know.





community centre profile: **Union Street**

A large and established community centre in the heart of Sandbach in Cheshire, **Union Street** is looking better than ever these days after a full refurbishment and new kitchen thanks to our partner organisations Frank Rogers, Overbury, and our Plus Dane colleagues. This makes it a great base for a variety of activities and projects for local residents, including health checks, yoga, over 50s exercise groups, social activities and more.

Twice a week you'll find the friendly Young at Heart Residents Group in session there. The group is led by neighbours Susan and Leslie, who saw how important it was to be able to provide a meeting place for anyone nearby wanting to get out of the house for a chat, a cup of tea, and maybe try a new skill or activity.

The notice board in the entry way will let you know what is on and when, or contact our engagement team for more information.

together again!

All of our community centres are now open again, and ready to welcome you back.

Our centres were closed at the start of the pandemic, and have been reopening their doors again as and when they have been able to, in keeping with covid safety rules.

The Bromley Farm Wellbeing Hub in Congleton was the last to reopen at the end of February, and we're pleased to say it is now back to business as usual across Merseyside and Cheshire.

Each centre offers a variety of health and wellbeing activities, friendship groups, play sessions, exercise classes, mental health support and more.

If you'd like to find out more about our community centres, or let us know if there is anything you would like to see on offer at a centre near you, contact our Engagement and Partnerships team on engagement&partnerships@plusdane.co.uk.

new skills, new confidence, new job!

If you're looking to get back into work, we can support you – here some of the ways we could help:

- One-to-one support from an expert employment advisor
- build confidence and skills and get applying for jobs
- interview technique and digital skills
- Access to jobs and employers
- Help to create a strong CV
- Careers advice
- Access to nationally recognised qualifications



Get in touch with our team on **07436548467** or email engagement&partnerships@plusdane.co.uk

We have community centres in the following locations:

- **Bromley Farm Wellbeing Hub**, Congleton
- **Union Street Community Centre**, Sandbach
- **Riverview Community Association**, Aigburth, Liverpool
- **Sheil Park Residents Association**, Kensington, Liverpool
- **The Irene Milson Resource Centre**, Kelvin Grove, Liverpool 8
- **The Clock Community Centre**, Everton

We look forward to seeing you again soon!





robot help to heat homes

We have started a new pilot project to help make our homes more energy efficient – and we're using a robot to do it!

Q-bot is a machine that can lay insulation under floors in certain kinds of properties that are usually very hard to treat.

We have begun work on **50 bungalows across Congleton**, that are nearly 100 years old and have suspended timber floors that mean they lose a lot of heat. The Q-bot is placed in the underfloor void, and **controlled remotely to spray insulation to the underside of suspended floors**. This immediately reduces heat loss through the floor and stops draughts, **saving on average £150 a year on heating bills**.

Over the next **two years**, our **retrofit programme** of work aims to **improve the energy efficiency of at least 200 homes**, while reducing carbon emissions as part of our progress towards to net zero.

We are the first housing association to use a special framework, the PfH Social Housing Emerging Disruptors (SHED), that gives us access to new, cutting edge technology to upgrade our homes, and look forward to making use of more exciting innovations in future.



new homes for you: Kings Moat

HomesHub by Plus Dane is thrilled to launch these **brand new 3 bed homes** along with a **selection of 2 bed apartments** situated in the **sought-after Westminster Park area of Chester**. Built by **award-winning developers Redrow**, these homes are available to buy through shared ownership and come complete with modern bathrooms and kitchens (*with integrated oven and hob*).

With Chester Business Park only a 2 minute walk away, the **picturesque Chester city centre within easy reach**, and a whole host of local attractions and amenities on your doorstep, you'll be perfectly located for work, rest and play.

Don't miss out on this fantastic opportunity to take a step onto the property ladder!

Visit our website for more information



**LOCAL
ATTRACTIONS
AND
AMENITIES
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DOORSTEP**



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