



EPIC NEWS

Issue 16 – February 2025

Message from CEO, Tracey Johnson

Welcome to our latest EPIC News. Christmas and New Year seems a long time ago now, but Spring is on the horizon – just about! Our December 2024 edition of EPIC News was an opportunity to wish you all a happy festive season, so in this edition you'll find a lot more information.

Many of you may recall that in 2021 EPIC received a regulatory downgrade from the Regulator of Social Housing, which was subsequently upgraded in May 2023 which was great news.

At some point during the period April to September 2025, we will be inspected by our Regulator. This provides us with the opportunity to tell our continuing journey of improvement both in relation to financial viability, how well EPIC is managed, and most importantly, how we listen, act, and engage with you. Some of you will have a chance to talk to the Regulator as part of the process, we welcome your participation.

We continue to develop in a number of areas across the business including understanding your needs, the services we provide and working hard to improve them. We have developed and improved relationships with partner organisations and they are working alongside us in providing help and advice to you. Together we can offer help and advice in matters where we may not have all the answers, or we simply are unable to offer the service you need.

Getting involved with EPIC through our various ways, will give you the opportunity to understand the work we are doing and the changes we are making, centered on what you are telling us. Let us know if being part of our evolving group of involved tenants appeals to you, we are always looking to grow this community. More information in this edition around our Tenant Ambassadors too.



I hope you enjoy reading the latest edition of EPIC News!

Tracey

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- Alice Charity fundraising
- Rent and Service charges
- Partner Drop-In sessions
- Seasonal Valentine's Day recipe
- Information on Loan Sharks
- ...and much more!

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Community Voice Event

On Wednesday 13 November 2024 we held our first Community Voice event at Normacot Grange Community Building in Meir. The event was held in the evening between 6:30pm and 8:30pm. We were delighted with the turn out, and perhaps it was the fish and chip supper that was the pull, but both the event and supper went down a treat!

Tenants who attended felt comfortable sharing their thoughts and ideas with CEO Tracey Johnson and Board



Member, Jonathan Moore, which led to some insightful discussion around how we can communicate better with tenants and build trust. Some clear areas of focus from the discussions included changing our use of language, such as stopping the

use of jargon, and ensuring adequate time was planned for future events. Overall, it was a really positive event, and the tenant feedback we received will be crucial to help us improve the way we work and understand the needs of our tenants more.

Next Community Voice event Saturday 8 February 2025

Future Community Voice events will be held once a quarter and split across Meir and Bentilee - the next event is set to take place on Saturday 8 February, between 10am and 12pm, at The Pavillion on Ubberley Road (opposite Park Hall Care Home). And, as it's the weekend, we're offering everyone a free oatcake with us!

This event is open to all EPIC tenants, whether you live in Meir, Bentilee or Hanley. We realise that transport can sometimes be an issue, so get in touch if you need some help getting to us. If you have any special dietary or access requirements, please let us know.

If you'd like to come along, you can let us know either by:

- Emailing reception@epichousing.co.uk
- Calling Reception on 01782 252575 (Mon-Fri, 9am to 4pm)
- Booking via Eventbrite: EPIC Housing Community Voice Tickets, Sat 8 Feb Nov 2025 at 10:00am | Eventbrite
- Popping into Reception on Ubberley Road (Mon-Fri 9am to 4pm)

We look forward to seeing you there and offering you the opportunity to talk to us direct about anything that's affecting you and your tenancy.

All feedback is welcome, as it helps us to improve and shape our services to you. At this event we will be joined by our CEO Tracey Johnson and Margaret Dodwell who is both a Board Member and also Chair of our Audit and Risk Assurance Committee.

We appreciate that inclusion in this edition of EPIC News is a little late in the day, and we have communicated separately to all tenants about the event on the 8 February, so if you're not able to join this one and would have liked to, our next one is scheduled for Wednesday 14 May, 6.30pm to 8.30pm. Keep an eye out for location, but it will be in Bentilee.

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December 2024 Fundraising

EPIC Housing are delighted to have raised a huge £525 throughout December for our corporate charity Alice Charity.

This means we have raised an amazing amount of £877 since April 2024 and we'll continue to raise funds to hand over to Alice Charity in April 2025.

The December total was raised via our tombola at The Discovery Academy Winter Fayre, selling water bottles at the St Stephen's Church Bentilee Christmas Fayre, raffling off advent calendars and staff donations on Christmas Jumper Day.

A huge thank you to all EPIC staff who were involved and to our fabulous suppliers who donated items for the tombola:



- Brenden Fern Limited
- Hankinson Whittle
- JRB Construction Ltd
- Beechwood Fire Protection.

Data Capture

In January we started a programme of information gathering about you and any household members. We want to ensure that we are capturing and holding correct information about you so that our services meet your needs as much as possible.

It's a huge task and your co-operation is very much appreciated. We do hold existing information on many of our tenants, and where that is the case, we won't be bothering you, but where we need new information, or to confirm existing information, you may receive a call from us.

Examples of some of the data that really helps us to shape and deliver great service are things like nationality and whether any tenant has any additional support needs that we may be able to help with.

These calls are genuine, however if you have any doubt about this (or any other) call you receive from EPIC Housing, please end the call, and contact us on 01782 252575 to speak with a member of our team and verify that the call is genuine.



Tenant Annual Report

You may have seen via our website that in November 2024, we shared our 2023/24 Tenant Annual Report. You can see the full document [here](#). This document provides you with details on how we performed through the financial year April 2023 to March 2024 together with some great information on partnership working, and tenant influence.

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Rent and Service Charges

It's that time of year again when our Board has been considering the rental increases for next year which are due to take effect from April 2025. This is never an easy decision, especially given the ongoing cost of living crisis and the financial challenges many of you face.

Costs are increasing across all businesses, and EPIC is no exception. The cost of providing core services to our tenants, including repairs and maintenance, neighbourhood services, and capital works and their associated material costs, are sadly only going in one direction. So that EPIC can continue to provide these services and invest more in your homes, rents will be increasing by 2.7% from April 2025 in line with the majority of the Housing Sector and City of Stoke-on-Trent Council.

You don't need to do anything at the current time, we will be writing to every tenant to advise you of the financial impact around the end of February/early March.

Some of our properties receive services, such as gardening and communal lighting. The costs of these services are passed on to the relevant tenants by way of a service charge, in addition to their rent. We have managed to keep service

charge levels relatively stable over the last 4 years with minimal increases since 2021. The only change we have made during that period was, following consultation, the introduction of a communal lighting charge for some of our tenants due to the significant rise in utility prices.

Following your feedback, we are currently in consultation with a number of tenants regarding additional chargeable services that are likely to be introduced from April 2025. Notification of any changes resulting from the consultation will be included in your individual rent increase communications.

Don't panic, we will also be providing some frequently asked questions with answers about the changes to your service charges, as well as details of who to contact should you wish to discuss anything with us.

And don't forget that from April you'll need to adjust any standing orders you have in place to pay your rent, and also any payments you may make by other means, so that you don't get behind on your rent. If you receive Universal Credit, you need to contact the Department of Work and Pensions to inform them of the increase in your charges so that your benefit can be recalculated, and you don't fall into arrears.

Your Privacy

EPIC is required by law to hold and share with you a 'Privacy Notice'. This notice tells you what to expect when EPIC collects personal information about you. It applies to all future tenants, existing tenants and members of their household. A full copy of the Privacy Notice can be found [here](#).

We have recently updated our Privacy Notice in relation to Data Processors (section 9).

As part of our approach towards supporting you in the management of any damp and mould in your home, we are trialing a device that, when placed in your home, will share data such as temperature and humidity. This will help us to be even more pro-active in dealing with the issue of damp and mould. If your home does have one of these installed we will be sharing your name, address and start date of your tenancy with the providers of the device, hence the need to review our Privacy Notice.

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Helping us to maintain your home

Understanding the maintenance requirements of your home to ensure that it is safe, warm and secure is not only through your contact with us when a repair is required, or through our planned programme of replacement kitchens and bathrooms. We also carry out a visual inspection of your property, known as a Stock Condition Survey, at least every 5 years.

A Stock Condition Survey is an important assessment of the condition of the main elements in your home; including the roof, windows, external doors, kitchen, bathroom, ventilation and smoke detection. This is another great way of

ensuring that your home is being maintained by us to meet current living standards. The great news is that across all our tenants homes, we currently have 86% that have had a survey within 5 years. It can sometimes be challenging to gain access to tenants homes, for a number of reasons, but this service is provided by EPIC to ensure that your home continues to be safe, warm and secure, so please do help us to help you in maintaining your home.

If you have received a call, calling card or letter regarding a Stock Condition Survey, please contact our Asset Team on 01782 252575 to book an inspection.

Having your say

We are constantly reviewing our ways of working and how we deliver services to you. Some of the details are contained within our policies, and where they have an impact on you, we share those documents with you before they are active, to hear your thoughts and views.

We do this in a variety of ways, including direct email, smaller focus groups of tenants, our Tenant Ambassadors, Community Voice and on our website.

You may have seen that recently we published

drafts of our Decant Policy, Vexatious Complainant Policy and Tenancy Fraud Policy. These are just recent examples of documents that we have asked for your feedback on, so please keep an eye out as we continue to review and shape policies that impact you.

The article in relation to the policies mentioned above can be found [here](#) and whilst the time has now passed for sharing your thoughts, it does provide you with an example of the work we are doing and there will be other opportunities on other policy documents in the future.

Shaping our Tenant Portal

You may recall and have seen in our October 2024 EPIC News the work we are doing to finally launch a 21st Century Tenant Portal. This has been a long time coming, but we are almost there and the pending launch will be in the Spring, once we have concluded our testing to ensure that it is safe, secure and easy to use.

We were also delighted that 9 tenants have been involved in the journey to-date and we have been working alongside them to develop the look, feel and services that you'll be able to access via the Tenant Portal. Watch out for details on the launch in due course.

PARTNER DROP-IN SESSIONS

Moneyline & Potteries Moneywise Drop-Ins

Moneyline and Potteries Moneywise will be holding a joint drop-in session every Wednesday at our Bentilee offices on Ubberley Road, so come along anytime between 10am and 4pm for chat about all things money!

Moneyline will be promoting their new low-cost loan which is available solely for the Midlands area and Potteries MoneyWise will also be there to offer general financial and budgeting advice.

Please be aware that EPIC Housing are not liable for any outcomes following advice taken by tenants from these sessions.

Keep an eye out on socials for confirmed dates!

Moneyline



'Stoke Thrive at Five' Drop-Ins

Stoke Thrive at Five will be at our Ubberley Road offices in Bentilee the last Monday of every month, holding a drop-in session for parents with children under 5 years old.

Come along anytime between 2pm and 4pm, and meet their friendly Parent Connectors, who can support you with advice, information on local playgroups and everything you need to help your little ones thrive!

Keep an eye out on socials for confirmed dates!

COMING SOON: CALENDAR OF TENANT ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES!

Keep an eye out for our new Calendar of Tenant Engagement Activities, with ways for you to get involved and help shape the services we provide to you.

EPIC TENANT AMBASSADORS

Our Tenant Ambassadors

In August 2024, our new 'Tenant Engagement and Influencing Strategy' (click [here](#) to view) was approved by our Board. This strategy continues to shape and embed across the business and is already delivering some great outcomes and changes through your engagement and influence.

Part of our approach, and contained within the strategy, are our Tenant Ambassadors. The role of a Tenant Ambassador is described within the strategy as:

- Performance monitoring across tenant facing services
- Input into EPIC Housing's publications, including the tenants annual report, newsletters and communications around engagement opportunities
- Help in planning for events, both EPIC delivered and those in the wider community as a whole
- Monitoring changes made to services as a result of tenant engagement, and the impact resulting from those changes
- Reviewing engagement activities on offer, to ensure that they are robust, relevant, and offer sufficient variety
- Training and support to enable all members to actively participate in the role
- Scrutiny of EPIC policies and procedures.



Do you know who our Tenant Ambassadors are?

They have kindly agreed for their details to be shared here:

- Shona Wilson and Jill Heath from Meir
- Bernice Dawson from Hanley
- Maureen Kearns and Christopher Gianassi from Bentilee

We're sure that if you bump into them and wanted to catch up on anything EPIC related, they would be more than happy to have a chat.

EPIC and the Tenant Ambassadors meet on a regular basis and we're really seeing the benefit of their involvement and input. There's still more to do, but it's definitely going in the right direction.

If you would like to become a Tenant Ambassador, please contact Mark Bourne on 01782 252575 or email m.bourne@epichousing.co.uk

SEASONAL RECIPE

Valentine's Day Cupcakes

With Valentine's Day on Friday 14 February why not give this recipe a go? You could make them for someone you love or even for yourself!

Prepare: less than 30 mins

Cook: 30 mins to 1 hour

Serve: Makes 12

Ingredients

For the cakes

- 125g/4oz unsalted butter, softened
- 125g/4oz caster sugar
- 2 free-range eggs
- 125g/4oz self-raising flour
- 150g/5oz raspberries
- 6 passion fruit, sieved pulp only
- a little milk, to loosen the mixture as necessary

For the icing

- 500g/1lb 1½oz icing sugar
- 160g/5½oz butter
- 1 vanilla pod, seeds only
- 2-3 drops pink liquid food colouring
- 50ml/1¾oz milk
- hundreds and thousands



Method

1. For the cakes, preheat the oven to 180C/350F/Gas 4. Sit 12 paper cases in a muffin tray.
2. Beat the butter and sugar in a bowl until pale and creamy. Add the eggs, one at a time, and beat until well combined.
3. Fold the flour, raspberries and passion fruit pulp into the mixture until almost smooth. If the mixture looks too stiff, add a little milk, as necessary.
4. Divide the mixture among the paper cases then bake for 20 minutes. Remove from the oven and set aside to cool in the tin for 10 minutes. Turn the cakes out onto a wire rack and set aside until completely cooled.
5. For the icing, using an electric whisk, cream the icing sugar and butter together until light and fluffy. Whisk in the vanilla pod seeds and food colouring. Gradually whisk in enough milk to form a smooth paste.
6. Spoon the icing into a piping bag with a large star-shaped nozzle and pipe the icing over the cake. Sprinkle over the hundreds and thousands.

Do you have a recipe that you would like to share? Send it to m.caine@epichousing.co.uk and it could be included in the next newsletter!

The Illegal Money Lending Team for the West Midlands has provided us with the following information on Loan Sharks.

What is a Loan Shark?

Anyone can be a victim of a loan shark – your family, friends, neighbours and even you.

It's not always easy to spot a loan shark as they come in all shapes and sizes and will at first appear friendly, just part of the community. It is when you can't pay that they will turn on you.

A loan shark is someone who lends cash as an unauthorised business.

If someone is struggling to pay a debt the loan shark will resort to threats, violence and intimidation to get what he thinks you owe, even if the debt has been paid off several times over.

A loan shark will typically have little paperwork and, will add penalty charges for late payments. Sometimes they will add random sums to the bill.

Many victims keep paying because they think they can afford the agreed weekly sum, but they don't realise how much their continuing weekly payments add up to or they are too afraid to stop payments.

Our advice is that you should never go to a loan shark. They do not provide a community service; they are simply out to make money.

Loan sharks:

- Are running an unauthorised business under the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000
- Often refuse to tell the borrower how much they still owe, when they will finish repayments.
- Often increase the debt or add additional amounts.
- May take items as security- including passports, bank cards and driving licences.
- May resort to violence, threats and intimidation.

What is being done to stop this?

The Illegal Money Lending Team investigates illegal money lending and any related offences - in the past this has included violence, blackmail, drugs offences, threats, kidnap and even rape.

**If you think you may be involved with a loan shark,
call the team in confidence on:**

Phone: 0300 555 2222

Text: 07860022116

E-mail: reportaloanshark@stoploansharks.gov.uk

Website: www.stoploansharks.co.uk



EPIC Housing are now on Instagram!
Follow us for all the usual updates
@epic.housing

Estate Walks

Between March and May this year we'll be restarting our programme of Estate Walks.

These will give all our tenants the opportunity to join colleagues at EPIC in visiting the areas in which EPIC operates, noting those things that require attention.

Further information will be shared soon once the programme has been agreed – in the meantime, if you would like to know more or would like to take part, **please contact Mark Bourne on 01782 252575 or email m.bourne@epichousing.co.uk**



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