

plusdane.co.uk

unity

customer magazine

Plus Dane Housing

Issue 44 | Spring 2023



inside:

taking charge:
electrical safety

damp and mould:
what to do

customer support:
how can we help

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

We hope you find the information in Unity useful, and if there's anything you would like to see featured in future editions, let us know at communications@plusdane.co.uk.

inside this edition

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contacting us:

If you need to contact us, our colleagues are well trained to deal with all kinds of issues and are committed to working with you to find the best solution.

We understand that when you need us, you might be feeling stressed, upset or under pressure. **Unfortunately we are seeing an increase in some customers being aggressive or abusive** – and although this is very much a minority, we would like to remind you that we expect everyone to treat our colleagues with respect and allow them to work with you to resolve your query. By working together we will be able to provide you with the best service. **Thank you.**

A message from the chair of our Board



As the Board of Plus Dane, we have faced a number of financial challenges in these uncertain times - but of course that is nothing when compared with the challenges many of our customers face.

Conscious of this, we set up a Cost of Living working group made up of Board members and colleagues to look at what more we can do to help those struggling due to increasing costs, particularly energy bills.

As an organisation however, we are seeing the impact of inflation in the building, materials and other costs we have to cover day-to-day, and at the moment that is running at about 12%.

So one of the most difficult decisions we have had to make is on the rent increase for the coming year. We have to bring in more income to cover our increased costs, but we are also so aware of the pressure many customers are under.

The Government has "capped" the increase housing associations can set at 7%. Very reluctantly we have had to decide that - along with almost all the other associations - we will have to put up rents by that amount. Of course, that leaves us with a 5% gap that we are going to have to cover by looking for savings in other areas. Nevertheless, we are going to continue with all the help we offer to those facing difficulties, and the key message is: ***Please tell us if you are struggling to pay your rent, before a problem develops.***

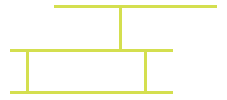
Over the coming year we are concentrating on improving those homes with the lowest energy efficiency ratings to help with those bills, and that means that some other improvement programmes will have to be delayed. This will be alongside continuing to improve our repairs service, reduce complaints and give our customers a stronger voice in all that we do.

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.





should I be claiming **UC Universal Credit?**

Universal Credit is a monthly payment to help with your living costs. You may be able to get it if you are on a low income, out of work, unable to work, or depending on the make-up of your household. If you are not already receiving any other benefits it is definitely worth putting your details into the calculator on our website - or your Income Officer or our Welfare Team can help with this.

what is managed migration?

Everyone of working age who currently receives either Jobseekers Allowance, Income Support, Housing Benefit or Tax Credits will have to move over to Universal Credit by the end of 2024, for customers receiving Employment and Support Allowance this will be by 2028. This is called managed migration. We do not know yet when our customers will be contacted by the DWP to make this move.

When Managed Migration is rolled out into our postcode areas you will receive a UC Migration Notice letter from the government which will you give you three months' notice that you need to claim Universal Credit.

You may be better off making the move to Universal Credit ahead of getting the letter from the DWP, but it is really important that you get advice first before doing this as you could be worse off, and cannot go back.

can I get help to apply?

There is lots of help to support you with a Universal Credit application. **You can contact our welfare team (welfare.team@plusdane.co.uk or 0800 169 2988), or Citizens Advice on 0800 144 8 444.** There is also a step-by-step guide on their website, at www.citizensadvice.org.uk/benefits/universal-credit

On our website, you can try our Benefits Calculator to help you see what you may be entitled to, and we also have a Budgeting Tool to help you maximise your income and keep track of your outgoings.

I am pension age, is there anything that could help me?

Yes possibly. Pension Credit is extra money to help you cover your costs if you're over State Pension age and living on a low income. You might be able to get it even if you have other income, savings or assets. It is separate from your State Pension, and claiming it could unlock other benefits too. Visit www.gov.uk/pension-credit for more details, or contact our Welfare Team who will do a full benefit check with you as there are other benefits such as Housing Benefit and Attendance Allowance that you may also be eligible to claim.

report loan sharks



Loan sharks are illegal money lenders who may offer you cash, with no paperwork, and lots of interest to repay. They might threaten you if you can't keep up payments, leaving you with no-one to turn to. **You are not in trouble if you have borrowed from a loan shark - it is the lender that is committing a criminal offence.** Stop Loan Sharks is an organisation that can help. **You can call anytime on 0300 555 222 or live chat on their website stoploansharks.co.uk.** to report loan sharks and get confidential support to keep you safe.

debt advice you can trust

StepChange is a dedicated debt advice charity that can help if you are worried about money. Visit their website at stepchange.org, or call them on **0800 138 1111** for free help and support for as long as you need it or ask our Welfare Team to make a referral to the **RAISE Debt Advice Team**





electrical safety checks

As your landlord, we are responsible for making sure the electrical wiring in your home is safe and in good working order. Electrical dangers are often invisible, but can be fatal, causing fires and electric shocks.

As part of our commitment to keeping you safe, every five years we will visit your home to carry out a full electrical safety inspection. It is really important you let us into your home to do this.

When it is time for your electrical safety check, we will make an appointment at a time to suit you so we can get the access we need to carry out the work. Our electrician will need to be able to get to your fuse box, sockets and light switches, and the job will take around 2-3 hours to complete. During this time your electricity will be off for about one hour.

Any other time, if you have an electrical problem in your home, report it to us as soon as possible to arrange a professional repair. Electrical systems need to be repaired by qualified people, no matter how minor the issue might seem. Please do not try to fix it yourself as there always needs to be follow on testing to ensure the wiring is safe.

Around 15% of all domestic fires in England and Wales are caused by electrical faults, with some of the main causes being appliance faults or breakdowns and broken cabling.

If you are over 65, or classed as vulnerable, your local fire and rescue service in Cheshire or Merseyside offer you free fire safety checks in your home. They also offer a free online service to create a fire safety plan for you and your home. Their websites also offer lots of safety advice, including around electrical issues.

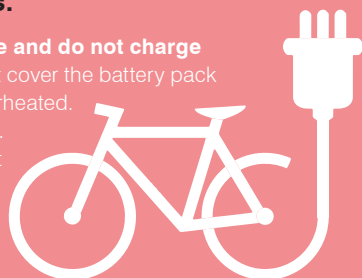
here are some of their top tips:

- **Don't run appliances or charge devices when you are out of the house, or asleep - you will have less time to react if a fire starts.**
 - **Always buy electrical products - including chargers - from reputable retailers and manufacturers. Fake and substandard products are a fire risk.**
 - **Don't overload plug sockets - they can overheat.**
 - **Check cables for damage or wear and tear and look for any scorch marks around sockets or plugs. If in doubt, do not use them!**
 - **Never use water on an electrical fire. Pull the plug or switch off the power if it is safe to do so.**
- GET OUT, STAY OUT AND CALL 999**

There has been a rise in fires caused by items like e-bikes, e-scooters and hoverboards, powered by lithium-ion batteries.

Please take extra care charging and storing them in your home and do not charge when you are asleep or go leave them when you go out. Do not cover the battery pack when charging, or store near things that could easily catch fire if overheated.

Make sure you have working smoke alarms by testing them regularly. **Smoke alarms save lives.** If when you test your alarms they are not working please call us immediately and we will arrange for them to be fixed straight away. If there is a fire, do not attempt to put it out – **GET OUT OF THE HOUSE AND CALL 999**





new homes for you

find your dream home



Coming soon: HomesHub by Plus Dane is thrilled to launch our brand new shared ownership development, Alexandra Gardens in Crewe. A peaceful, rural ambience crossed with a perfect location for commuters that is ideally suited for modern family living.



Open grazing land runs along two sides of this development, providing a calm rural aspect whilst extensive open space, ponds and wildlife habitats add to its peaceful nature. Situated just 2km away from Crewe town centre, Alexandra Gardens is conveniently located for everything the town has to offer, with a major rail station and strong motorway links.

Whether you're a first time buyer, a family or anyone looking to find a great home, we can work together to give you the home you've always dreamed of. Don't miss out on this fantastic opportunity to get on the property ladder!

These 2, 3 and 4 bed homes are being built to high-specification by award-winning developers Watkin Jones, and will be available to buy through shared ownership.

For more information or to register your interest, email us at sales@homeshub.co.uk



our complaints process



help with **damp and mould**

Over the winter, we expect reports of damp and mould. There has been even more this year, because lots of us have been forced to reduce how much we heat our homes due to the cost-of-living crisis.

Damp looks like a wet patch on a wall or ceiling and is caused by things like leaking roofs, gutters, missing pointing in brickwork or cracked render. Wet patches can also be caused by **condensation**.

Condensation is caused by too much moisture in the air. We all create moisture just by breathing, as well as daily activities like cooking, boiling kettles, showering, and drying clothes. This can mean for a family of four, 24 pints of moisture are created in the home each day!

Moist air settles on cold surfaces, where you may see **mould growth**. Heating and ventilating your home are the easiest ways to tackle this.

You can also treat areas with a mould and mildew spray.

Damp may need specialist treatment and repair.

We have a new approach to tackling damp and mould. When you report it, if you can send us pictures we will look at these the same day, so we can quickly see if we can help or whether a damp specialist is needed. Where we can, we will visit your home to assess and treat the issue in one appointment. Some cases may need a specialist survey to find the cause of damp.



We now follow up all reports of damp and mould after three and six months, so we can make sure the measures to treat the problem are working. Find out more in the 'you and your home' section of our website.

helping you back into **work or training**

We can help to customers in Cheshire and Merseyside looking for training and employment opportunities, through our ongoing partnership with specialist organisations.

In Cheshire, Springboard (Cheshire Learning Partnership), is able to assist customers with job searches, interview practice, careers advice, access to employers, nationally recognised training and more.

Springboard has work clubs located across Cheshire East for customers to access and receive one-to-one support. These are in Congleton, Sandbach, Crewe, Macclesfield and Alsager. The organisation can provide access to qualifications in subjects including maths, English, digital skills, construction, first aid and a range of online courses.



If you are a Liverpool resident and not in work, our partnership with Liverpool in Work could be able to help.

They can assist with finding jobs with immediate start dates and offer plenty of help to get you job ready, including CV writing, interview skills, computer skills and other training.

Liverpool in Work is also based at the Irene Milson Centre in Kelvin Grove, L8 every Tuesday and Thursday from 9.30am to 4.30pm. You can ring **Lisa on 07841 725 199 or Richard on 07917 773 647** to make an appointment.

Contact the engagement team via email at engagementandpartnerships@plusdane.co.uk for more information about employment and training opportunities.



looking after **your mental health**

We have teamed up with healthcare charity Making Space for our Wellbeing First project. Their experienced and caring team can provide friendly, one-to-one support if you are concerned about mental health issues like depression, stress, anxiety, worry, or low mood.

Sessions can take place over the telephone, on video calls like Zoom, or face-to-face.

Our strategic partnerships manager Usman Ashiq said:

"We know with the cost of living crisis, among many other things, there is a lot going on for people to worry about and this can really effect mental health. Wellbeing First helps us to reach out to customers and make sure we can provide meaningful support, to try and prevent a mental health issue turning into a crisis."

Rachel Munn, head of psychological wellbeing services at Making Space, said:

"We are excited to get to work with Plus Dane on this project. It is great to have another option of support for people as we look forward to helping tenants with their wellbeing."

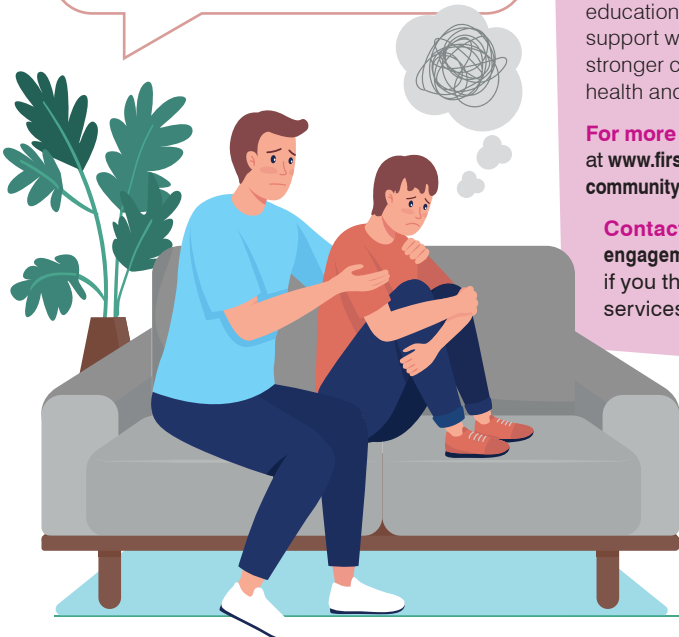
Wellbeing First is open to all Cheshire-based customers of Plus Dane aged 16 and over.

In the Liverpool City Region, we have teamed up with **First Person Project** to deliver bespoke mental health support to our customers.

First Person Project is a Community Interest Company, which means it invests in communities by providing specialist, accredited mental health training, education programmes, coaching and support workshops. Its aim is to create stronger communities and improve mental health and wellbeing for all.

For more information, visit their website at www.firstpersonprojectcic.co.uk or email community@firstpersonprojectcic.co.uk

Contact us at engagement&partnerships@plusdane.co.uk if you think you could benefit from these services.





customer assurance panel gets to work

Our new customer assurance panel has held its first meetings.

The panel, known as CAP, replaced our old scrutiny panel and is made up of a team of ten customers from a range of backgrounds. It works with Plus Dane and our Board to help us look at how we can improve our services and provide a better customer experience.

The CAP will meet four times a year and address three main topics each meeting. So far this has included things like the cost of living crisis, the rent cap, damp and mould, and customer satisfaction. They will carry out in-depth service reviews to find out what is working well and recommend what needs improving.

Kate Jungnitz, our director of customer services, said:

"The CAP will hold Plus Dane to account by looking at how we are performing, how satisfied customers are, and providing suggestions for improvement. Their work will allow us to make informed decisions, based on the needs and priorities of customers."

Updates from the panel and its findings will be made available on the Plus Dane website.



meet our panel



CHAIR: Mark Sumner was the chair of the scrutiny panel before CAP. In these roles, he has expanded his skills and career prospects, having been supported to complete a Diploma in payroll management and a housing officer course.

Ian Corbishley has a background in finance, is married with two grown-up children, and in his spare time volunteers for a local radio station.

Angela Needham is retired, with a wealth of experience in housing and community work. She believes social housing residents should feel valued and listened to.

Amanda Graham joined the CAP to be a voice for shared owners.

Shaf Choudhary is a former scrutiny panel member who has been involved in social housing issues for nearly 30 years.

Peter Jeorges has experience in the commercial, creative, housing and charity sectors and is committed to helping improve our customer experience.

Ian Francis is a joiner with a background in youth work. A former Liverpool city councillor, he has volunteered on many boards and charities.

Joanna Rushton was a member of the scrutiny panel and hopes that the CAP can maximise the wealth of customer experience in the way we are run.

Rachael Johnston is passionate about improving services for vulnerable people, especially helping those with additional learning needs to access information.

Charity Foxton works with autistic children and joined the CAP to have a voice and be a positive influence in making our customer experience better.



working in partnership with residents - **community gardens**

We all know how the environment where you live has an impact on how you feel about your home and community. So, last year working alongside residents we transformed some community gardens that needed a bit of love. Here are some examples of the work we did:

haigh street garden



Working alongside our contractors the Bell Group, we supplied and installed three large planters for a gardening project in Liverpool.

bromley farm community garden

Since the demolition of Hilary Avenue flats in Congleton, the land has been cleared and last summer we worked with a group of volunteers from the Bromley Farm Wellbeing Hub and the Bell Group, to turn it into an area for wildflowers and to grow food. This year the volunteers have more ambitious plans to grow food and herbs that the local community can pick.



st james & lightley courts

Last Summer our older person's team were out in force to help tidy up two communal gardens at St James's Court in Congleton and Lightley Court in Sandbach. During the lockdown, the gardens had overgrown and needed a bit of work to get them back to their former glory. The residents loved what we were able to achieve in a day and helped by providing regular brews.



rosehill communal garden

Last summer a team of Plus Dane volunteers and the resident gardening team at Rosehill Court embarked on a huge tidy up to improve the area around the blocks. Together we weeded, hacked back shrubs and restored an area that had overgrown to reveal an attractive ancient quarry wall. This was a massive effort from everyone and the residents were really pleased by the results.



Two of our customers in Goostrey, Cheshire took part in an open gardens event.

Dorothy Kelly-Hughes and Colin Hughes raised more than £10,000 for the East Cheshire Hospice and The Remembering Nell Foundation, in memory of Nell Jones who was sadly killed in the Manchester arena bombing.

Dorothy said: "the open garden was a first for our village and we wanted to reflect our love of plants from around the world, the centrepiece being a 100-year-old olive tree. We had over 100 visitors to our garden on the day".

Well done Dorothy and Colin!

mount pleasant community garden

We were able to support the Mount Pleasant Community Garden in Cheshire with a £500 grant towards a major transformation project. Volunteers have planted fruit trees, sowed a wildflower garden and much more. They will continue their work this spring!



plans for 2023

As you can see 2022 was a busy year! If you have a community garden that you need help with and want to work in partnership with us to give it a tidy, please email emma.sneyd@plusdane.co.uk



our biggest winter campaign

Our annual winter campaign supports customers over the colder months, and last year's was our biggest yet. While we are pleased to have been able to support so many of you, the cost of living crisis means we saw a 25% increase in people needing help.

The campaign provides food vouchers, food and toy hampers, festive events and more. Following referrals identifying those most in need, it helped 323 households, 121 of those with children.

We delivered 255 food vouchers, 143 fuel vouchers, and 62 food hampers. 109 households received toys, and 13 referrals were made to mental health partners. Christmas parties and lunches were held in our sheltered schemes and temporary accommodation for the first time since the pandemic.

The campaign continued into the new year, supporting customers in need of items like energy efficient slow cookers, microwaves and electric blankets.

It is all made possible through the help and support of our partner organisations and contractors, who made generous **CASH DONATIONS TOTTALLING AN AMAZING £22,000.**

These include **Penny Lane Builders, Bell Group, Sustainable Building Solutions, Frank Rogers, Consortia UK and Mission Christmas.**

We're here all year round to offer help and support, from access to food bank vouchers to help getting back into work and training.

To find out more, please email customer@plusdane.co.uk or call 0800 169 2988



save money with **Pocket Power**

We have joined up with Pocket Power, a social enterprise that specialises in finding the best deals on a range of household bills.

A call with Pocket Power lasts between 30 to 60 minutes and saves people an average of £200-£300 a time, helping to apply for discounts and switch phone, broadband water, car insurance and banking bills.

It's ideal for those who are not tech savvy or don't have time to look around for cheaper deals.

Since teaming up with Pocket Power, more than 65 of our customers have saved a total of nearly £15,000. Arrange an appointment by contacting **engagement&partnerships@plusdane.co.uk** or **0800 169 2988**



we delivered 62 food hampers





portal



OUR NEW CUSTOMER PORTAL IS LIVE!

You can now access your account with us online for the first time - so you can pay rent, report repairs and much more, whenever you like.

We have been rolling out access to the portal in phases over the last few weeks in order to better support you with the registration process.

If you haven't heard from us already, we will soon be contacting you with details of how to set up your account. Once you are registered, you will be able to log in to the portal, set up your own

password and access a host of services, including being able to view tenancy information, change personal details, pay rent, and report repairs.

There is also a dedicated page on our website containing how-to guides, videos and more information on getting started.



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