

Growing greener skills – new advice centre is launched

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Our new Green Homes Advice Centre is helping to grow new skills – helping local people to save energy and cut their fuel bills.

The new advice centre is part of Green Homes, Green Skills Ltd which we have created along with our regional partners, Accord Housing Group.

Based on Bull Street in the centre of West Bromwich, the Green Homes Advice Centre team shows residents how to save energy in the home, reduce utility costs and provide home energy assessments to see if they can fit solar panels on their property. Solar panels can save money on energy bills and increase the value of a property.

Paul White, our project manager leading the project said “Our dedicated staff are available to help customers with information on grants and other funding options. importantly, we can give expert and practical advice about saving energy in the home, from insulation advice to programming your boiler.”

The centre also provides an opportunity for local residents to get closer to some of the renewable technologies currently available, including demonstrations from approved suppliers.

“Backed up with a comprehensive library of information and a small ‘green’ shop, we aim to provide a whole house approach to energy efficiency. A selection of free energy saving devices, such as water saving tap and toilet adapters will also be available,” said Paul.

Key services delivered by trained and experienced staff include:

- Advice on whether you could save money by fitting solar panels or other energy saving technologies
- Free and impartial energy efficiency advice
- Signposting to grant and discounts
- Guidance on selecting the right contractor/installer from our approved contractor lists
- Information on a wide range of energy-related topics including renewable domestic technologies
- Management of any installations by our professional team

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More affordable homes

The Group has completed a total of 81 new homes for affordable rent and shared ownership in the last financial year. Of these, 22 completions were Mortgage Rescue cases.

A sign of quality

Black Country Housing Group's Care & Repair service is facing a challenging year because of government funding cuts but there is still cause to celebrate.

Our Care and Repair team, which provides home improvement services for thousands of vulnerable people in Birmingham and the Black Country, has been awarded a Foundations Quality Mark.

Foundations – the national body for home improvement agencies in England – carried out a rigorous assessment of the service, which helps people to stay safe, secure and warm in their homes. Care & Repair carries out anything from free household repairs to providing loans for repair work to adapting properties so that people can return home early from hospital.

"As a home improvement service, we have been hit hard with cuts to programmes such as the Kick Start loan-based housing scheme, the delivery of disabled facilities grants and some handyperson services but this comes at a time of great achievement," said Lesa Kingham, Head of Care & Repair.



"Despite the setback of immediate funding difficulties, we know we need to diversify to ensure our service remains responsive to people's home improvement needs. Last year, we launched our integrated All Round Care service which offers personal care and small repairs for vulnerable people and the agency is also set to become a green technologies installer in preparation for the Green Deal."

Lesla Kingham added: "With health funding changing too, Care & Repair will also be engaging with GPs to look for other ways that essential home improvement services can be funded for vulnerable people to achieve cost savings in the NHS."

Ground-breaking news in Woodgate Valley

An official ground-breaking ceremony took place to mark the start of a new scheme to build 12 affordable new homes in Woodgate Valley.

Black Country Housing Group (BCHG) and Birmingham City Council are behind the new homes venture in Lye Avenue, which is due to be completed in February 2012.

It will contain six new homes to rent and six for shared ownership and the mixture of two and three bedroom houses and bungalows is being built by Lovell, the award-winning developer.

Representatives from BCHG, Birmingham City Council and Lovell took part in the ceremony.

"The new development will provide Birmingham residents with well-built, comfortable new homes. I look forward to the new tenants moving in next year," said Rebecca Stevens, development manager at BCHG.



Sandra Spence, Councillor John Lines of Birmingham CC and David Gough of Lovell mark the start on site at Lye Avenue

MP praises Kelly at launch of our new care service

Kelly Bywater won the prestigious Home Care Worker Award at the Great West Midlands Care Awards because of the high quality care and support she provides for residents at Doveton House, a sheltered housing scheme in Stourbridge.

Kelly saw off strong competition from care professionals across the region and has now gone forward to the national awards – the winners are due to be announced in May.

The awards judges commented: "Despite her young years, Kelly impressed the judges with her passion for her work and commitment to the older people she supports."

Kelly was congratulated by Margot James, MP for Stourbridge, as she launched Black Country Housing Group's new All Round Care service in November with the residents of Doveton House.

All Round Care will provide assistance to elderly and vulnerable people living in the area so they can continue to live independently in their own homes.

Using our experience of providing personal care to residents at Doveton House, the new service will be delivered by trained and dedicated staff. Carers will visit people in their own homes to offer support with personal tasks, from washing and bathing, to light house work and laundry tasks.



Local people will also be able to access an award-winning, reliable and responsive handyperson service for small household repairs – whether it's fixing a leaking tap or fitting a smoke alarm to replacing unsafe floorboards or cleaning out guttering.

MP Margot James said: "I am so glad that I visited Doveton House – it's a highly impressive unit of sheltered housing managed by BCHG. All Round Care will provide a valuable service to older people living locally. I was also impressed by the dedication, skill and professionalism of the carers."

Ground-breaking new eco-homes idea

Creative thinking by the senior team at Black Country Housing Group could lead to a pioneering new way of building low cost eco-homes.

Modelled around the car industry's successful mass-customisation approach, BCHG's Eco Cottage Concept is completely new to the social housing sector.

One basic home built to a good eco standard with zero-carbon insulation – and then the customer chooses how it is designed inside, depending on their individual needs and budget.

Richard Baines, Director of Sustainable Development, said: "The automotive sector has perfected the art of mass construction. The car may be a single model but the customer can choose from a range of colours, trim levels and extras to personalise it. Why not adopt this approach to building a house?"

"If there's no public subsidy and the need to build more cheaply, then this seems a logical approach. Our CEO

and Chair have been thinking creatively and come up with this challenge. We now need to prove that the model works and that there is a market for homes like these."

Richard explained: "A kitchen, for example, usually costs around £2,000 to fit out. An eco cottage would just have basic space with plumbing and power points at cost of just £150. A customer could then go to Ikea and buy their cupboards and opt to pay less rent or the money saved could build another house."

"If we can prove that there is more than one way to provide good housing, we can change the model in such a way that we can reduce the cost of building the many new homes so urgently needed in the UK," he said.



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Richard builds his skills

Richard Baines – our Director of Sustainable Development – has added a new qualification to his credentials.

He has been accredited as a Building Research Establishment Environmental Assessment Method (BREEAM) “Other Buildings” assessor by the Building Research Establishment (BRE).

This means that he can assess buildings where bespoke criteria are developed by the BRE so that building types that do not have an off-the-shelf assessment method can be assessed.

Our first commission was for BCHG’s new library/office building in Blackheath. See story below.



New library set to open

Construction work has just been completed on a new library for Blackheath and our new eco-efficient offices.

A joint project between Black Country Housing Group and Sandwell Council, the library will occupy the ground floor of the building and we will use the first and second floors as offices.

The building combines natural light with open spaces due to the extensive use of glass. Its energy-efficient design features state-of-the-art systems for heating, lighting and hot water.

The library is in the final stages of its internal fit-out and will be open soon.



BREEAM is the leading and most widely used environmental assessment method for buildings. It sets the standard for best practice in sustainable design and has become the measure used to describe a building’s environmental performance.

Sandwell LINK contract stays with BCHG

We will be hosting an innovative programme designed to help the users of health and social care services in Sandwell and Walsall for the third year running.

Our Community Regeneration Department has been appointed as hosts for Sandwell Local Involvement Network (Sandwell LINK) during 2011/2012. The programme was set up in 2008 as a voice for local people to decide on the services they need.

Sandwell LINK has grown to a membership of over 730 in the past 12 months and has taken up numerous issues on behalf of the community. Its key success has been a research project into discharge from hospitals – already some service providers have pledged changes to their services to tackle the problems encountered.

This year the focus of work will be on the NHS reforms and Sandwell LINK’s transition to HealthWatch.

Members also hope to undertake further work similar to the discharge review to ensure that improvements in local service provision are continued.

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