



Helen Armour: "short notice"

## Safe as houses

**With over 30 staff and 1,600 tenants, it's vital for Melville Housing Association to keep up to date with Health and Safety regulations.**

**M**elville Housing Association, based in Dalkeith, just outside Edinburgh, celebrates its 10th anniversary this October and has expanded significantly from its original base. It was formed as a charitable partnership between tenants and Midlothian staff of the public sector agency Scottish Homes with the transfer of their Midlothian housing stock.

Today the Association's 31 staff support some 1,600 tenants no longer just in Midlothian but also in Forth, South Lanarkshire, into which it has extended its provision of high quality affordable homes and housing-related services.

Over the last year, Melville Association has invested time and resources to make sure that its own office premises comply with the extended rights now available to people with physical or mental impairments under the Disability Discrimination Act. This has included relocating its conference room to the ground floor and installing a loop system to help customers who use hearing aids.

Corporate Services Director, Helen Armour, explains that Health and Safety issues are the principal focus of Melville's relationship with Mentor Services.

The Association is responsible for both the wellbeing of its own staff at work and when visiting tenants in their homes, and for enforcing proper Health and Safety provisions among the contractors who work on its properties.

As landlords, she explains, they have a legal duty to service gas appliances once a year for the safety and wellbeing of their tenants. This free-of-charge service for tenants means arranging – and, if it comes to it, insisting upon – entry to premises, and making sure tenants are fully aware of the need to co-operate.

Similarly, the Government's Right to Repair Scheme means that all registered "social landlords" like the Melville Association must provide a good repairs service. "If some repairs aren't completed within a given response

"...WE HAVE A VERY GOOD RELATIONSHIP WITH MENTOR AND THEIR APPOINTED CONSULTANT. I CAN'T SEE THIS CHANGING." **Helen Armour**  
**Melville Housing Association**

time, we're duty-bound to help them find an alternative contractor," says Helen.

Mentor provides its Health and Safety back-up under a three-year rolling contract. It carries out an annual compliance audit, provides regular updates on legal or regulatory change, oversees and advises on Association policy initiatives, and acts on Melville's behalf if safety disputes arise with contractors.

Helen Armour says a big advantage of this relationship is her ability to call in Mentor at short notice. Issues

### MENTOR EXPERT

Steve Campbell

#### Enforcement Action risk for Housing Associations

While generally competent at selecting contractors to carry out work, sadly, Housing Associations often fail to monitor and review their work adequately. Legal requirements mean that Associations must regularly check on contractors during the work to ensure the safety of their tenants/residents. If these requirements are not fully met, Housing Associations leave themselves open to legal action by the enforcing authority.

When undertaking risk assessments for their own activities, Housing Associations very often do not adopt a holistic approach to assessment, but simply focus their attention on specifics such as manual handling, hazardous substances and personal protective equipment. Caretakers, for instance, have wide-ranging duties that could expose them to a variety of hazards, like falling, electric shocks and weather conditions. Often these are not identified on the risk assessments and subsequently are not adequately controlled.

New Construction (Design and Management) Regulations 2006, effective from next year, are likely to strengthen existing regulations. This will add to Housing Associations' responsibilities, both as clients and designers.

Mentor's remit is to guide clients through effective risk assessments and then – crucially – assist and support them in complying with their legal duties. Recently many more Housing Associations have successfully employed Mentor's services.

Mentor have recently helped sort out include: a dispute with a contractor over whether an interior job required scaffolding; concerns over a design feature in a new-build property; and uncertainty over the respective responsibilities of the Association and its staff for pool cars.

"Their annual workplace compliance audit is really good and we have a very good relationship with Mentor and their appointed consultant. I can't see this changing," says Helen.

The relationship is close, she jokes, but not so familiar as to get careless: any temptation by the Association to "nudge our shortcomings out of sight" ahead of the annual compliance audit would be cottoned on to by Mentor all too rapidly.

#### MENTOR WORKSHOPS >>> see p11

- Working Safely
- Risk Assessment

