



**Celebrating over six  
decades of giving people  
a place to call home**



**SOUTH DEVON RURAL**  
HOUSING ASSOCIATION LIMITED

South Devon Rural Housing Association Limited  
Registered England and Wales  
South Devon House, Babbage Road, Totnes TQ9 5JA  
T. 01803 863550

Registered Office: 305 Gray's Inn Road, London WC1X 8QR  
E-mail: [Info@southdevonrural.com](mailto:Info@southdevonrural.com) Website: [www.southdevonrural.com](http://www.southdevonrural.com)

# Spring Newsletter



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SPRING 2024



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**SOUTH DEVON RURAL**  
HOUSING ASSOCIATION LIMITED



**Places  
for People**



## Thank you, from Peter Symons, SDR Chairman



Since 1958, SDR's single purpose has been to provide safe, affordable homes and quality services to our residents. We're determined to continue delivering on that mission.

Despite steady growth, expansion and investment, we have found ourselves needing to run ever faster to make forward

progress – or even stand still. Small housing associations like SDR are more vulnerable to the kind of seismic economic shocks we have seen in recent years – and which still continue.

A combination of factors – none of our own making – forced me and the Board to take the tough decision to close our wonderful care home at Forder Lane House just before Christmas.

A number of recent changes in wider society, along with new Government policies, continue to challenge us to find funding to develop and invest in our future.

With rising costs and higher interest charges on loans, we are also being squeezed by a Government-imposed cap on rents.

We know partnership working can make it easier to provide the affordable homes and living space people in this region desperately need.

After announcing merger proposals just before Christmas, we ran a seven-week consultation – giving tenants and stakeholders a chance to comment and ask questions via a range of different channels. And you did us proud, so thank you!

Your response informed our decision to recommend the merger to a special meeting of shareholders. Following their agreement to the merger, this change was completed on 20 March. We will ensure that we keep you informed of developments over the coming months.

This newsletter includes over 4 pages of answers responding to your merger questions. We hope our answers will give you even more confidence in the exciting future that this merger promises.

## Welcome message from Christine Candlish, CEO



I'd like to echo Peter's comments about the feedback we received from our consultation exercise. It gave us the confidence to feel that we could sign up to become full partners with Places for People.

This newsletter should bring you up to date with all the latest developments up to the

completion of the merger on 20 March. There is a mass of information – but don't be daunted by the quantity of text. Just hone in on the issues that interest you, by looking at the main headings and bunches of questions to find the answers and reassurance you need.

Business as usual carries on whilst we work together with teams from Places for People to ensure a smooth transition in terms of working practices, technology and customer service.

So, there are some useful and informative articles in this issue, apart from all the latest information about and around our integration into the Places for People family. You'll still find features like a recipe page, coffee break puzzles and some early spring gardening guidance.

One very important matter that we have been asked to give coverage to is the need to be clear about what constitutes Domestic Abuse and what those who are suffering can do to seek help and / or to report what's happening. The first step along the way is recognising that what someone is doing to you is not only unacceptable but should be reported to the authorities.

Read on for some wellbeing advice from our partners at Places for People.

## Merger plan goes ahead after vote of confidence

**SDR completed its merger with the Places for People Group on 20 March 2024, after receiving regulator approval.**

The merger, which will open up opportunities for greater investment in affordable homes in South Devon, was initially given approval by SDR shareholders in early February. There followed a slight delay whilst compliance was confirmed by the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA).

With that approval confirmed, SDR is now officially a subsidiary of Places for People and both partners can start working towards full integration later this year.

SDR, which currently owns and manages 357 homes in the South-West of England, will play a key role in helping Places for People to expand its operations in the region, whilst benefiting immediately from the greater sustainability afforded by being part of a larger organisation.

SDR's full integration into the Places for People family will be a seamless process so far as SDR customers are concerned. They were consulted on the initial proposals – and can be assured that they will continue to be provided with key information as the partnership moves forward.

### INVESTMENT

**Greg Reed, Places for People Group CEO, said:** "I'm really pleased that our proposed merger with South Devon Rural has been approved. Affordable housing is in huge demand and the level of investment needed to improve and maintain existing homes is significant across the country.

"This merger will allow us to commit the resources needed to protect and build upon the great work South Devon Rural has done since it was established in 1958. Affordable housing customers should not be forced out of living in rural areas, particularly when it's where they have built a life. We'll work together to create opportunities to deliver more new affordable homes in this part of the country."



**Christine Candlish, CEO of South Devon Rural, said:**

"I'm delighted that all our work over recent months has paid off and that SDR will soon be joining the Places for People family in what I'm confident will prove to be a highly beneficial move for our customers and the broader community.

"This merger enables both parties to go forward playing to their strengths – giving SDR the sustainability it needs to deliver its aims of providing more affordable homes in the South-West, whilst enabling our senior partner to widen its scope and influence within our region.

"I'm pleased that the feedback from our recent consultation exercise among SDR residents demonstrated an understanding of the issues and broad support for the move. The future looks a lot brighter from here on in".





## A welcome message from Steve Ashton, Partnerships Director at Places for People

"We are excited to continue the great work of South Devon Rural Housing Association, which has been delivering great homes and services for more than 60 years. We are also looking forward to investing in homes for customers and building new affordable homes in South Devon."

"Providing affordable homes for the people of South Devon, so that they and future generations can remain in this beautiful part of the country, is vital for these communities to thrive."

"I have been impressed with the community focus of SDR, which aligns with Places for People. The SDR community focus is at its heart and is valued by customers. Working with the team in Totnes, we will ensure that this focus remains."

"With the support of my colleagues at Places for People, my job is to make the merger process for both customers and the South Devon team effortless and seamless. A lot of hard work on both sides has got us to this landmark moment and will serve us well in the coming months as we integrate."



## TWO NEW FRIENDLY FACES JOIN THE SDR TEAM

### Florence and Annette boost Housing Service

*Two new recruits who joined our Housing Team in January are now helping to improve our service levels as we move forward with our exciting merger plans.*

*Annette Camp (left) and Florence Garrard are both filling the vital roles of Repairs and Housing Assistants.*

#### SKILLS

*The two new recruits, who both have excellent customer service and administrative skills, will be a point of contact for tenants and will liaise with contractors to ensure that repairs are prioritised. They will also carry out general duties as part of the housing team.*



## Merger consultation process prompts questions galore...

We're grateful for the active participation of our residents, stakeholders and community members in the seven-week consultation period which concluded on 7 February, concerning the proposed merger between SDR and Places for People Group (PfP).

The consultation sought to understand the views and concerns of residents, staff, local councillors, MPs, and our suppliers and partners.

Various consultation methods were employed, including online and in-person meetings, as well as options to feedback via phone, email, and our website.

Feedback in response to the consultation documentation was as follows:

- 29 completed survey forms received in the post from customers
- 5 completed survey forms received via the website from customers
- 1 non-board Shareholder attended a shareholder Q & A session - 8th January 2024
- CEO attended meeting of a Parish Council - 17th January 2024
- CEO attended meeting with Dartington residents - 1st February 2024
- 1 email received from a non-board shareholder - 5th February 2024

The resident responses received represent just under 10% of our tenant base.

The survey results highlight a generally positive reception to the merger, with a good level of understanding among residents about mergers. However, the survey also highlights areas for improvement in communication and engagement strategies to ensure all residents feel well-informed and their concerns are adequately addressed.

In light of these findings, our next steps will be designed to not only enhance our communication strategy but also deepen our engagement with residents to ensure that everyone feels informed, supported, and involved.



### CHOICE OF PARTNER

- Why not merge with another Housing Association?
- Was PfP the only organisation approached?
- Wonder why you didn't put this to tenants before you made this decision?

Once SDR's Board decided to look into the idea of a merger, a number of potential partners were considered and a short list prepared - all were Housing Associations, as is Places for People. We engaged with each of these and sought which one offered the best match in terms of sharing our business ethos and enabling SDR to continue its work in the region.

As this exercise progressed, it became clear that Places for People (PfP) ticked each of our boxes on a corporate level and that their management team were people we could happily work with. Since PfP was chosen as our preferred partner, the link-up has been subject to a thorough due diligence process and monitored by legal and financial professionals. We also a seven-week consultation process with tenants, informed by a comprehensive information pack and opportunities for them to discuss the idea face-to-face with senior SDR people. The final decision to recommend the merger to SDR's shareholders wasn't taken until after the SDR board had reviewed all the due diligence information and reviewed all the questions and comments from the residents' consultation.

*Please turn to the next 4 pages to see our answers to a range of questions that you asked during the merger consultation period. These Q&As can also be found on the SDR website, where they complement a set of FAQs that we uploaded in December as part of our information pack.*



# Your consultation survey questions answered in full

## CONSULTATION AND COMMUNICATION

- *Who is seeing results of survey? Anyone of importance?*
- *Does anyone read these questionnaires?*
- *Would there be an opportunity for a meeting to get questions answered in person?*
- *What actually will happen in the months and years to come is something we, as tenants need to be made aware of through the housing association*

The results of the consultation were collated and analysed by staff at SDR's offices in Dartington, overseen by Chief Executive, Christine Candlish.

Her report on the feedback was presented to the SDR Board and your feedback was carefully considered before Board Members discussed whether to recommend to SDR shareholders that the merger should go ahead.

The analysis of your feedback has been uploaded to our website at: [Feedback-from-Resident-Consultation-on-PfP-Merger-for-web-NS-150224.docx \(live.com\)](#)

With regard to getting questions answered in person, the consultation period that ended on 7 February included a number of options for personal contact – either in a room or over Zoom. These were listed in the Merger Special newsletter, but take-up was small.

As the integration process progresses, we will provide further opportunities for people to ask questions or comment via various channels, including meeting in person where possible.

Further information about how the merger is progressing and what this will mean for you will be shared with you as the picture becomes clearer.

## EFFECT ON TENANTS

- *What benefit will there be to existing SDR Properties and Tenants?*
- *How will the merger benefit the tenants?*
- *Will the merger bring a positive or negative impact?*

First, PfP puts Community at the heart of everything – just like we do. As a much larger organisation with far greater resources at its disposal, PfP offers all the advantages brought by economies of scale, but especially access to funding streams that would support vital expansion of new social housing in the South West alongside more investment in our existing stock.

This partnership would also offer both immediate and longer-term enhancements to the service that SDR's customers receive – for example a dedicated contact centre with 24/7 accessibility, backed up by a local presence. In other words, the best of both worlds.

Benefits would also include access to all services PfP customers receive and, more importantly, new customer service initiatives coming soon. Recent examples are the inclusion of Home MOTs with the annual gas service, to check for issues relating to damp and mould, overcrowding, and safeguarding.

## RATIONALE FOR MERGER

- *Was this purely financial?*
- *Does a merger happen when a HA overreaches their capacity on a functional as well as an economical level?*
- *If there are problems, will the merger solve these?*
- *The financial clout and expertise the company have must surely benefit SDR*
- *I understand from the newsletter that services would improve as a result of the merger, but don't fully understand why or how this would happen.*

In the months leading up to the decision to look into a merger, SDR's leadership team were aware that a combination of factors, some local, some national and some global, were restricting income, whilst utility and other costs were rising and interest rates on borrowing were going up.

These elements together led the SDR Board and Management to conclude that SDR's financial viability could be at risk in the medium to longer term, unless we became partners with a larger, like-minded organisation. We are confident that the extra resources and economies of scale offered by Places for People will benefit SDR, whilst we bring benefits to the table too – such as a strong regional presence and good relationships with local authorities and other stakeholders.

The Merger Special newsletter contained a raft of information about Places for People, much of it spelling out how we believe this partnership would be beneficial for SDR tenants.

Here is a list of some of the enhancements that we quoted in the newsletter:

+ Dedicated complaints management with the Customer Focus team + Effortless Lettings Process + Responsive Property Management and Maintenance + Local, knowledgeable, trusted Housing Officers + Dedicated ASB services, including mediation + Regional and National Customer Group framework + Access to a wide range of support services + Energy-efficient home improvements, recycling programmes, green spaces + A dedicated contact centre with 24/7 accessibility, backed up by a local presence.

## FINANCIAL ISSUES

- *How much is the merger costing?*

We do appreciate your interest in understanding the financial aspects of our merger. Whilst we want to be as open as possible about all aspects of the merger, some of the costs involved are commercially sensitive, which means that it's unfortunately not possible to give any detailed costings.

Despite it being challenging to divulge the exact costs, we want to assure you that the decision to merge has been made with careful consideration of both immediate and long-term financial impacts. Our primary goal is to enhance our capacity to serve our tenants better, achieve greater efficiency, and ensure the sustainability of our services in the long term.

The merger involves various one-time costs associated with integration, legal fees, and restructuring. However, these are viewed as investments into the future of our combined organisation, which will enable us to utilise economies of scale and provide a broader range of services to our tenants. By joining forces, we're not only aiming to enhance our operational efficiency but also to improve the quality and availability of housing options.

We are committed to financial transparency and ensuring that the merger will ultimately benefit our tenants and stakeholders. As we move forward, we will continue to seek ways to optimise our resources and deliver value to our communities.

## TENANCIES AND RENTS

- *PfP talk a lot about 'affordable' housing & rent; isn't this different to the social housing remit?*
- *Will type of tenancies offered change?*
- *Will we still be classed as social tenants?*
- *Will rents increase to affordable homes rent level?*

Affordable housing is a generic term, widely used in the media to describe homes that are more likely to be accessible to people on low incomes. Social housing is one type of affordable housing on offer and is usually managed by local authorities or housing associations.

Your tenancy agreement with SDR would remain the same. The tenancy rights you enjoy would not be affected by the merger. Places for People, like SDR, are a regulated social housing provider, so they have to adhere to the same rules.





## Your consultation survey questions answered in full continued

Most of our residents are Assured Tenants. Under these tenancy agreements, you have a lifetime legal right to stay in your home – providing you continue to meet the conditions of your tenancy.

Some exemptions will continue to apply as they do now. Some tenancy agreements are for a fixed period of time e.g. 5 years, or other periods stated on the Tenancy Agreement. Changes to fixed-term tenancies cannot legally be made as a result of any merger.

Your rents are protected by the Regulator of Social Housing, meaning the same rules over how rents are set and increased, apply to both SDR and Places for People as both are Registered Providers of Social Housing (better known as housing associations).

Service charges are also reviewed on a yearly basis. Your service charge covers the direct cost of services we provide to your home and/or estate such as cleaning or grounds maintenance for example. You will continue to receive a breakdown of these costs with your rent increase notification as you do now.

### EASE OF PURCHASING

- *Will it make it easier to purchase our property if that was possible?*
- *Will it benefit young adults of current families access a home other than privately renting?*

'Right to Buy' does not apply to the vast majority of housing association homes. There is a 'right to acquire' for homes built after 1989 which offers a discount on the market value of the property.

The ethos of both SDR and PfP is to make the option of a decent home accessible to as many individuals and families as possible. Enabling people on low incomes to afford their own home is a complex procedure, with a variety of options that can be tailored to individual needs. It's fair to say that the driving force behind this collaboration is enabling both partners to offer the best possible housing options for everyone.

### REPAIRS AND IMPROVEMENTS

- *Will repairs be better managed / done more promptly?*
- *Maybe someone will do the jobs a bit quicker*
- *Concerns about length of time to get repairs sorted*
- *Will we still get the same level of service?*
- *Will more money be available for outstanding works? i.e. Exterior painting*

- *When are you going to action the issues with your properties?*
- *Hoping for improvements with repairs*
- *Just hope they do better in dealing with the mould and damp in the houses. Our last landlords were better and they told us SDR would be better; the jury is out.*

We will continue to provide housing services and repairs services to SDR residents. These services should improve as a result of increased resourcing that would result from the merger. We will continue to invest in the safety, warmth and security of our buildings. We will continue making provision for residents to engage with us and we will take action on day-to-day issues.

This partnership would also offer both immediate and longer-term enhancements to the service that SDR's customers receive.

For example, PfP invite their customers to join their new national and local panels. By volunteering to become an involved customer, you will join others from across the country to represent customer views on issues like fire safety, involvement and complaints.

Benefits would also include access to all services PfP customers receive and, more importantly, new customer service initiatives coming on-stream. Recent examples are the inclusion of Home MOTs with the annual gas service, to check for issues relating to damp and mould, overcrowding, and safeguarding.



### DOES BIGGER MEAN BETTER?

- *More difficulties in getting a response to tenants' problems?*
- *Will someone still be available to talk to on the end of the phone?*
- *When are you going to listen to your tenants?*
- *Will the merger mean a change in staff and repairs?*
- *Hopefully all positive, but I hope it won't lose that personal touch.*
- *Bigger is not always better in my view and very concerned that PFP is not a Housing Association.*

PfP are a social enterprise made up of complementary companies in placemaking, regeneration and development, investment management, property management and leisure.

Places for People Homes Limited, one of Places for People Group Limited's companies, is a housing association that is responsible for the majority of Places for People Group Limited's homes across the country.

Our services will continue to be delivered in the same way by the same local team of staff from our office in Totnes and we will continue to work to listen to your views and reflect these in improvement plans. We chose Places for People, in part, because they are committed to more locally responsive and accountable services. We are confident that the extra resources and economies of scale offered by Places for People will benefit SDR, whilst we bring benefits to the table too – such as a strong regional presence and good relationships with local authorities and other stakeholders.

- *What research has been done to explore PfP's tenants' experience? Especially how repairs are responded to.*
- *I was not impressed by what I found out about PfP online.*
- *Many negative comments about PfP on Trustpilot.*
- *Looking at PfP reports on website seems to show delays in repairs.*

As part of the short-listing process, all potential partners were checked thoroughly on a number of different criteria, including performance levels and customer satisfaction. Since Places for People were selected by SDR as our preferred prospective partner, there has been an exhaustive two-way due diligence process, which complies with industry standards for this type of merger.

SDR's Board and Management are confident that Places for People has robust customer service procedures that can only serve to enhance our ability to give an ever-improving repair and maintenance offering to our tenants.

Whilst both partners have now formally agreed to a link-up, that due diligence process will continue as we enter into an integration period whereby working practices and technologies become more closely aligned.

#### For 2022/23:

- *80.9% of PfP residents were satisfied with their services*
- *86% were satisfied with the repairs and maintenance service*

Social media platforms and review websites only provide a very partial view of what people think of an organisation so we would urge residents to rely on the independently validated survey results published by PfP.

### MISCELLANEOUS ISSUES

- *When are we having a charger installed for electric cars?*

This is not currently a high priority, especially as there is a growing network of on-street public charging points across the country and our region. Individuals may be able to have a home charger fitted at their own expense, subject to the power supply and domestic electrical system being suitable and also subject to permission from us as landlords. Whether it might become a more likely offering in the future depends on a number of factors, not least Government advice and grant aid.

**A full set of FAQs on our website**  
[www.southdevonrural.co.uk/](http://www.southdevonrural.co.uk/)







# Domestic Abuse – A problem of our times...

The Government website defines domestic abuse as “Any incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive or threatening behaviour, violence or abuse between those aged 16 or over who are or have been intimate partners or family members regardless of gender or sexuality”.

It should be remembered that domestic abuse is not confined to the common stereotype of male-on-female. It can happen in other partnerships and domestic situations too. There are several different types of abuse, including but not limited to:

- Emotional abuse
- Coercive control
- Threats and intimidation
- Physical abuse
- Sexual abuse
- Financial abuse

**Emotional abuse** typically involves non-physical behaviour that is meant to control or isolate a person.

Does your partner or someone you live with ever do any of the following?

Belittle you; Blame you for abuse or arguments; Downplay or deny the existence of abuse; Isolate you from your family and friends; Stop you leaving the house; Make unreasonable demands for your attention; Accuse you of having an affair or flirting with others; Tell you what to wear, who to see, where to go; Monitor your social profiles or use GPS to track you?

**Coercive Control** is a pattern of behaviours or actions that control the victim through fear. Examples of these behaviours include: Isolating you from friends and family; Depriving you of basic needs; Monitoring your time, and the time you spend online; Taking control over everyday aspects of your life; Depriving you of access to support services; Controlling your finances; Degrading or humiliating you.

**Threatening** or intimidating behaviour is designed to frighten someone into complying with the abuser. Does your partner or someone you live with do any of the following?

Threaten you with violence or death; Destroy your possessions; Invade your personal space while behaving threateningly; Threaten to kill themselves or your family; Read your emails, text or letters; Harass or follow you?

**Physical abuse** may involve the use of any or all of the following behaviours to hurt someone: Slapping; Hitting/Punching; Shoving; Biting; Kicking; Choking; Throwing objects.

**Sexual abuse.** Does your partner or someone you live with do any of the following? Touch you in a way you do not want to be touched; Make unwanted sexual demands; Hurt you during sex; Pressure you to have sex; Pressure you to have unsafe sex (e.g. not using a condom)?

**Financial abuse.** Everyone has the right to make independent financial decisions. If your partner or someone you live with is controlling your financial affairs in any of the following ways then you should seek help with an organisation listed in the panel published here. Does your partner or someone you live with:

Force you to take out money or get credit in your name; Make you hand over control of your accounts or lock you out of them; Add their name to your account; Cash in your pension or cheques without your permission; Ask you to prove what you've spent money on; Control what you can and can't spend money on?

**If someone you know** changes their behaviour because they're frightened of how their partner or someone they're living with will react, they're dealing with abuse.

Or download the free Bright Sky app to find support and information for anyone who may be in an abusive relationship or concerned about someone they know: <https://www.hestia.org/brightsky>

## ARE YOU IN IMMEDIATE DANGER?

If you're in immediate danger, please call 999 and ask for the police. You can also use EmergencySMS to send text messages to the Police.



The information in this article was adapted from the Wellbeing section of Places for People's website. To see more of the content, go to:

<https://www.placesforpeople.co.uk/help-support/your-wellbeing/domestic-abuse/>

Access to advice and tips like this is just one of the many benefits that customers of South Devon Rural can expect, following the joint decision by both Boards to agree a merger, which took effect on 1 March 2024. Please turn to Page 11 for news of another, more practical benefit this partnership will bring for SDR customers in the future.

## DOMESTIC ABUSE HELPLINES AND SUPPORT WEBSITES

### Support for Victims

[www.nationaldahelpline.org.uk](http://www.nationaldahelpline.org.uk)  
Call 0808 200 0247

### Men's Advice Line

[www.mensadviceline.org.uk](http://www.mensadviceline.org.uk)  
Call 0808 801 0327

### Women's Aid

[www.womensaid.org.uk](http://www.womensaid.org.uk)

### National LGBT Abuse Help

<https://galop.org.uk/>  
Call 0800 999 5428

### National Centre for Domestic Violence

<https://www.ncdv.org.uk/>  
Call 0800 970 2070

### Karma Nirvana (forced marriage support)

<https://karmanirvana.org.uk/>  
Call 0800 5999 247







## Stock Condition Survey is first merger benefit

Stock Condition Surveys are now being carried in SDR properties by experts working for Places for People.

This is the first tangible benefit of SDR's recent decision to become a subsidiary of Pfp.

Trained professionals will visit your home to assess its current condition, including its structural integrity, safety features, and any repairs or improvements that may be needed.

- The surveyors may take measurements, photographs, and notes during their assessment.
- The duration of the survey will vary depending on the size and condition of your property.
- All information collected during the survey will be treated with the utmost confidentiality and in compliance with data protection regulations.
- The survey will focus solely on the condition of the property and will not involve any other housing related issues.
- Findings from the Surveys will inform our long-term maintenance and investment plans and we will use the information to prioritise repair and improvement projects across our housing stock, with the aim of enhancing your living conditions and overall satisfaction.



## Tenant Satisfaction Survey results are being analysed

We want to thank all those residents who participated in our Tenant Satisfaction Survey last year.

Some chose to fill in a paper version of the survey, delivered with the summer and autumn SDR newsletters. Others filled in the questionnaire online.

### PUBLISH

The total number of forms returned was 66, which represents a good sample from our overall customer base.

Your feedback is currently being analysed and, once the full picture has become clear, we will publish the results. The information you provided will feed into a new system introduced by the Regulator of Social Housing to assess how well social housing landlords in England are doing at providing good quality homes.

### CROSSWORD ANSWERS:

**Across:** 1 Schnapps, 9 Overload, 10 Arrogant, 11 Suitcase, 12 Abstein, 13 Liar dice, 14 Vendetta, 18 Performs, 21 Hairless, 23 Sorcery, 24 Yarmouth, 26 Olive oil, 27 Farewell, 28 Magnetic.  
**Down:** 2 Curable, 3 Noontide, 4 Pianist, 5 Sots, 6 Rectal, 7 Placid, 8 Hassock, 13 Lamps, 15 Concrete, 16 Bahamas, 17 Reduced, 19 Roofing, 20 Martini, 22 Rammied, 25 Holm.

## Now's the time to spring into action to ensure a lovely garden!

**March is the month we look forward to as heralding the start of Spring. The Spring Equinox occurs on the 20th of the month and a short while later the clocks "spring" forward, giving us an extra hour of daylight in the evenings.**

For gardeners, March is the month to dust off the mower and garden tools and start doing some serious planting, pruning, trimming and tidying.

We must beware of exposing our tender plants to any late frosts, but the weather will be improving and the soil warming, so our hearts will be gladdened by the sight of daffodils and tulips brightening our borders.

Early Spring is for many when we re-acquaint ourselves with that major garden feature – the lawn. Routine maintenance should start in March by lightly raking the grass to remove winter debris and making the first cut. Choose a dry day for this and raise the mower blades to avoid scalping your lawn.

### BENEFIT

Dead-head any early flowering bulbs, but allow foliage to wither. If you have roses, these can be pruned according to type by cutting to an outward facing bud. Roses will benefit from feeding and mulching at this time.

It's also an excuse for an uplifting trip to the local garden centre to choose some plants for revitalising those borders!

As March gives way to April, your garden will start to become a hive of activity – not only for the bees buzzing about their business, but for the many plants that have lain dormant during winter.

For gardeners, this is also the trigger for stepping up the pace, with a host of jobs – depending of course on whether you have a large, multi-faceted garden, a smaller plot or maybe a small patio or balcony.

Drying winds should by now be making the surface soil dry, crumbly and workable. So get busy with your fork and hoe to turn over the earth and tackle that early crop of weeds. Mulch beds to eliminate weeds and conserve moisture.

If you've planned ahead, April should see your efforts rewarded as a mix of daffodils and tulips gives a continuous display of colour over several weeks, whilst we wait for the dormant herbaceous perennials to put in an appearance. It's also the time to sow hardy annuals, which mostly require very little in the way of specially cultivated or enriched soil.

If you're lucky enough to have a rock garden many alpine are spring flowering and should soon be providing a riot of colour, interspersed perhaps with tiny ferns, dwarf, slow-growing conifers and diminutive bulbs.

So, enjoy the fresh air, the sunshine, the exercise and above all the visual joy of your garden as it comes alive and points us towards the delights of long summer days spent in the great outdoors!







LET'S  
GET  
BAKING

# This Easter, why not have your (Simnel) cake – and eat it?

Easter comes a little earlier this year – on 31 March – which means you don't have much time left to prepare any goodies that you might be planning to tease the taste buds of family members. Or maybe you just want to treat yourself! Either way, here's an easy-to-follow recipe that will ensure one of our most traditional Easter confections is there on a plate come Good Friday.

Simnel Cake is a spiced fruit cake, similar to a Christmas cake, but lighter in texture. It's usually topped with marzipan but generally not covered in icing. Some people like to add balls of marzipan on top, which are said to signify the 11 apostles, minus Judas.

- Ingredients**
- 225g (8oz) butter, softened, plus extra to grease
  - 225g (8oz) self-raising flour
  - 2 tsp. ground mixed spice
  - 400g (14oz) mixed dried fruit
  - 150g (5oz) light muscovado sugar
  - 50g (2oz) golden syrup
  - Finely grated zest of 2 lemons
  - 4 medium eggs, lightly beaten
  - 2 tbsp. apricot jam
  - 500g (1lb 2oz) marzipan
  - Icing sugar – to dust

**Directions**

Preheat oven to 170°C (150°C fan) mark 3. Grease a 20.5cm (8in) round cake tin with butter and line with baking parchment.

In a large bowl, stir together flour, mixed spice and dried fruit until combined. Put the butter, muscovado sugar, syrup and lemon zest into a separate large bowl and beat together using a handheld electric whisk until pale and fluffy. Gradually beat in 4 eggs, whisking well after each one goes in. Add flour mixture and fold everything together with a large metal spoon.

Empty mixture into tin and bake for 1hr 25min, covering with foil for last 25 minutes. Leave in the oven until risen and springy to touch. Use a skewer to test when cooked through. Leave in the tin to cool.

Take cake out of tin, peel off parchment and transfer to a serving plate. To decorate, dust work surface with icing sugar and roll out two-thirds of the marzipan until large enough for a 20.5cm (8in) circle (cut round base of cake tin). Heat jam with 1 tsp water in a small pan over a medium heat until runny.

Brush the top of the cake with some jam, then lay the marzipan circle on top and gently press down to stick. Using a small knife, score lines on top of the cake to make a diamond pattern. Crimp the edge of the marzipan using the thumb and forefinger of one hand, and the index finger of the other.

Roll remaining marzipan into 11 equal-sized balls. Brush underside of each with a little jam or water and stick to the top of the cake. If you like, use a blowtorch to lightly brown the marzipan. Serve in slices.

## IT'S COFFEE BREAK TIME! GIVE YOUR BRAIN A WORKOUT WITH OUR CONCISE CROSSWORD PUZZLE



We've pitched the difficulty level at moderate, so we hope you'll take your brain on a bit of a workout but without too much head-scratching. Answers upside down on page 11.

- Across
- 1 German liqueur (8)
  - 9 Burden excessively (8)
  - 10 Self-important (8)
  - 11 Travelling case for clothes (8)
  - 12 Refrain voluntarily (7)
  - 13 Gambling game (4,4)
  - 14 Private feud (8)
  - 18 Acts (8)
  - 21 Bald (8)
  - 23 Black magic (7)
  - 24 I o W town (8)
  - 26 Staple of Mediterranean cooking (5,3)
  - 27 Goodbye (8)
  - 28 Charismatic (8)

- Down
- 2 Responsive to drugs (7)
  - 3 Midday (8)
  - 4 Musician who could play the Moonlight Sonata (7)
  - 5 Drunkards (4)
  - 6 Musical performance (7)
  - 7 Tranquil (6)
  - 8 Cushion for kneeling (7)
  - 13 Poaches with a torch (5)
  - 15 Substantial (8)
  - 16 West Atlantic island country (7)
  - 17 Decreased (7)
  - 19 Covering for a building (7)
  - 20 Cocktail (7)
  - 22 Battered (6)
  - 25 Small island (4)

To check your answers: A list showing the solution is on page 11 in this newsletter. No peeking though!

