



SPECIAL HOUSING AND ENVIRONMENT SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - 21ST NOVEMBER 2023

SUBJECT: HOUSING OFFICES RATIONALISATION

REPORT BY: DEPUTY CHIEF EXECUTIVE

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1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 To seek the views of members on proposals to permanently close the Housing Offices at Gilfach, Lansbury Park, Graig Yr Rhacca and Ty Sign, replacing them with a centralised housing service, based at Penallta House, as part of a proposal to modernise and improve housing services, prior to submission to Cabinet.

2. SUMMARY

- 2.1 As part of a review of how we provide housing services to our customers and communities, and following a comprehensive customer consultation exercise, we are seeking approval to permanently close all existing housing offices, replacing them with a centralised housing office at Penallta House. This will facilitate service modernisation and improvements by reducing the need for customers to travel to a housing office to receive services and make housing officers more available to our customers through working agilely within our communities, thereby increasing opportunities for access and engagement and building better relationships with our customers.
- 2.2 We had already begun to review of service delivery prior to the Covid 19 lockdown but working practices have since changed significantly, with the focus shifting towards accessibility of services and community-based delivery models. The decentralised housing office delivery model is out of date and although it benefited those customers and communities in the immediate vicinity, there were service accessibility barriers for those customers not able to physically attend those offices.
- 2.3 Removing the requirement to operationally staff several decentralised offices will allow us to explore and maximise opportunities to evolve our delivery model, focusing services and staff resources where they are most needed.
- 2.4 We propose to improve access by our customers to face to face contact and increase our community visibility, carrying out more home visits, be available at community hubs/other venues, and embed a community-based approach within our teams. Increasing our community presence will lead to a greater insight into the needs of our

customers and our communities, leading to a better understanding of localised issues and problems, enabling earlier intervention and targeted support.

3. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 3.1 Members comments are sought in relation to the recommendation that the housing offices at Lansbury Park, Graig Yr Rhacca and Gilfach, and the community housing office at Ty Sign be permanently closed.
- 3.2 Members comments are sought on the transition of the Landlord Service from a traditional office-based model to a community-based delivery model.
- 3.3 Members comments are sought on the relocation of the Landlord Service to Penallta House where the wider Caerphilly Homes Housing Service has recently relocated.

4. REASONS FOR THE RECOMMENDATIONS

- 4.1 The current decentralised office-based delivery model is out of date and no longer meets the needs of our customers or communities. Three of the remaining four offices have been temporarily closed since March 2020 with very little feedback received from our customers and communities.
- 4.2 To transform the way in which we deliver our Landlord Service, we need to remove the barriers that some of our customers experience when trying to access face to face contact and increase our community visibility, carry out more home visits, be available at community hubs/other venues, and embed a community-based approach within our teams.
- 4.3 74.1% of respondents to our recent comprehensive Caerphilly Homes customer consultation on the office closure proposals agreed with the proposal for our officers to work more regularly in community locations, with 68.5% agreeing with our proposal to offer more home visits.
- 4.4 The relocation of Landlord Services staff to Penallta House will result in the majority of the Caerphilly Homes Housing Service being co-located, which will encourage closer working relationships between all housing colleagues and facilitate improved, more consistent service provision. It will also meet the wider corporate transformation agenda to reduce the number of buildings and deliver services differently.

5. THE REPORT

Background

- 5.1 Prior to the Covid 19 pandemic the Landlord Service operated from four fully staffed housing offices, at Blackwood, Lansbury Park, Graig Yr Rhacca, and Gilfach, and one part time community office at Ty Sign, with core service elements such as Tenancy Enforcement, Rents and Tenancy Support, Older Persons Housing and Tenant & Community Involvement operating from the Business & Technology Centre, Tredomen.
- 5.2 The Covid 19 lockdown during March 2020 required the Landlord Service to adapt overnight and essential services were provided from a single centralised location at the Upper Rhymney Valley area housing office, Gilfach House. Interim management

arrangements were put in place and staff from the four housing offices attended on a rota basis to provide essential services and primarily worked from home in accordance with Covid restrictions. To maintain service delivery in these very challenging circumstances, interim management arrangements were implemented to ensure that four decentralised teams could successfully work together as one centralised team, and permanent changes to the telephony system were required to ensure that customers could continue to make contact by telephone at a time when face to face engagement was not permitted, resulting in an increased reliance on telephone contacts.

- 5.3 As Covid restrictions eased, the remaining housing offices and community office did not lend themselves to reopening in a covid safe manner due to the layout of the buildings, and the lease of the former Eastern Valleys housing office located at The Marketplace, Blackwood expired during December 2020 and was not renewed. The offices at Lansbury Park, Graig Yr Rhacca and Ty Sign remain closed with Landlord Services continuing to be provided from Gilfach House.
- 5.4 Decentralised housing offices were historically viewed as good practice and very popular with social landlords during the late 1980's and 1990's, but over the past 20 years or so there has been a sector wide shift towards the centralisation of housing services, with consideration being given to front line services being delivered at a community level in range of different ways. It is acknowledged that when the Landlord Service closed four of its previous eight Housing Offices between 2008 and 2014, some customers were disadvantaged by a need to travel further to access face to face housing services, with no alternative options introduced to mitigate the impact at that time.
- 5.5 Prior to Covid a move away from the decentralised service delivery model was considered, exploring how to modernise and streamline working practices to improve service delivery outcomes, meeting both the future aspirations of the service and the needs and expectations of our customers and communities. Other than the closure of 50% of its decentralised housing offices, Caerphilly Homes had not changed the housing management delivery model in three decades, disadvantaging many of our customers when viewed against the models of other social landlords.
- 5.6 As part of these service delivery improvements, surgeries at accessible Council and partner owned community venues, including libraries, community centres and health centres, were piloted. Offering financial support and assistance to our customers on housing related matters, they proved to be extremely successful in improving access to our services and engagement and helped to improve existing and develop new partnerships with other organisations. These were paused during the initial lockdown restrictions, but the Landlord Service has been working closely with Caerphilly Cares and other partners, and these have been re-introduced at several community venues on a pilot basis. This helped to determine the likely demand for community surgeries, and the most appropriate venues and locations for our customers, with varying degrees of success.

Current Position

- 5.7 The majority of activities undertaken at housing offices do not require a decentralised delivery model and there have been clear benefits of the interim centralisation of the Landlord Service, including a more consistent application of policies and procedures, a reduction in duplication, and better communication between staff across the wider Housing Service. There has been limited feedback following the temporary housing office closures over three and a half years ago, and the informal feedback that we have received is that if face to face contact is required, customers would rather have

interaction in person at their home or within their local community, than have to travel to an office outside of their immediate community. We realise that this is often inconvenient, and difficult for some for a variety of reasons, including distance, disability, and the availability and cost of transport. Although there have been varying degrees of success at community venues piloted to date, these locations were appointment only rather than drop-in and not publicised or promoted on social media.

Consultation

5.8 There is a statutory requirement under s234 of The Renting Homes Wales Act 2016 for Caerphilly Homes, as a community landlord, to consult with its customers (contract holders) on proposed changes to housing management arrangements and provide opportunity for comments prior to reaching a decision. During August 2023, all 10,669 Caerphilly Homes households were written to, seeking their views on the following proposals and invited to complete an anonymous questionnaire, either in hardcopy or online (see Appendix 1):

- i. Staff would spend more time out in your communities, bringing services to you, rather than you having to come to us. We could use venues such as local libraries and community centres. Some sessions may be available for you to drop in and others might be by appointment, and we would let you know more about these sessions in the future. More home visits would also be offered by Caerphilly Homes staff.
- ii. All Caerphilly Homes staff would be based together at one location, Penallta House near Ystrad Mynach. You would be able to meet staff here as well as out in the community. The Caerphilly Homes offices currently in Graig Y Rhacca, Lansbury Park, Gilfach and Holly Road would close permanently.

5.9 Only 178 Caerphilly Homes households returned the questionnaire. This is very low but may reflect that all but one of the offices has been temporarily closed for almost three years and their proposed permanent closure is not considered a significant issue for most customers. A significant proportion of those who responded were resident in the communities in which the offices are located, so would have been the most likely to have utilised the offices on a regular basis rather than those who were required to travel to them.

Of those who responded:

- i. 74.1% agreed with the proposal for Caerphilly Homes staff to work more regularly in community locations, whilst 14% disagreed.
- ii. 68.5% agreed with the proposal for Caerphilly Homes offering more home visits, whilst 15.2% disagreed.
- iii. 48.9% agreed with the proposal to have one main Caerphilly Homes office based in Penallta House, whilst 36% disagreed.
- iv. 35.0% considered that they would be affected by the proposed closures.
- v. 69.1% mainly contacted us by phone prior to Covid. This has increased to 83.7% since and 76.4% indicated this would remain their preferred contact method should the closures proceed.

- vi. The main reason customers gave for contacting the Housing Office was to report a repair, however these reports are all forwarded on to the Response Repairs team as undertaking of repairs is not a function of the Landlord Service
 - vii. 86.5% have access to the internet.
- 5.10 The decentralised housing offices at Lansbury Park, Graig Yr Rhacca and Ty Sign are HRA assets whereas Gilfach House is a corporate General Fund asset. The Service Asset Management Plan produced pre-Covid stated that each of the HRA buildings presented operational barriers for staff and customers, for example, inaccessible/non-compliant buildings for persons with disabilities, split level internal layouts leading to isolation, lack of meeting room facilities and being located on housing estates with poor public transport links etc..
- 5.11 The internal inspections carried out pre-Covid revealed that each of the buildings required a financial investment to improve the current facilities but this would not address the issues around location, layout, and accessibility. Although essential health and safety functions have been maintained, each of the buildings has seen a deterioration in their overall condition since their temporary closure during March 2020 and would now require a significant financial investment if they were to be reopened, including some major components, for example the Graig Y Rhacca office requires a new roof. All are in areas of identified unmet housing need and have potential for redesignation and/or redevelopment.

Future Service Delivery

- 5.12 Our current and future customers require more from Caerphilly Homes, as their landlord, than the historic landlord & tenant relationship. To enable us to better understand and respond to the needs of our customers and communities we need to increase our community visibility, carry out more home visits, be available at community hubs/other venues, and embed a community-based approach within our teams. We want to remove the barriers that exist for some customers who struggle to come into our offices or access services online and encourage more opportunities for customer and community conversations, building relationships and trust.
- 5.13 The traditional 'housing officer' role has changed significantly over the years and the importance and value of this role in our communities was a key topic at the Chartered Institute of Housing Cymru TAI Conference 2023, and a recommendation of the Better Social Housing Review 2022 (England) was that social housing providers must 'develop a proactive local community presence'.
- 5.14 Removing the requirement to operationally staff several decentralised offices will allow us to explore and maximise opportunities to evolve our delivery model, focusing services and staff resources where they are most needed. Increasing our community presence will lead to a greater insight into the needs of our customers and our communities, leading to a better understanding of localised issues and problems, enabling earlier intervention and targeted support.
- 5.15 Whilst not readily accessible for some customers Penallta House is considered a suitable location for a centralised housing office as it is centrally located in the County Borough, has onsite parking, a train station close by, is accessible for those with limited mobility and would offer opportunities for our customers to benefit from a range of council services in one location. It is acknowledged that whilst there are local bus and train services that stop close to Penallta House there is no public transport network immediately outside Penallta House. For those unable to access Penallta House

community surgeries and home visits will be available.

- 5.16 Whenever possible we would like to focus on meeting customers within their homes but also recognise the importance of creating opportunities to meet with them elsewhere. Although we have piloted surgeries in several community venues with varying success, these were by appointment only and our aim is to extend these, offering both appointments and drop-in services, with a proactive publicity and promotion campaign to encourage take-up. We are keen to extend our work with partners, recognising the benefits of a multi-agency approach, and are already committed to ensuring that the Landlord Service team play a key role in the new Community Hub at Rhymney Library.
- 5.17 As part of our recent statutory consultation exercise, we asked our customers for suggestions of community venues that may be appropriate for surgeries and have already begun to consider the suitability of the suggested venues in terms of accessibility for our customers, internal layouts that offer private rooms etc. Sharing our community venues/buildings in this way will not only increase our community presence and accessibility, but there may be an indirect financial benefit for those community facilities that charge for room hire and running costs.
- 5.18 The location, frequency, need and demand for housing surgeries within our communities would be subject to regular review in order to ensure that we are targeting resources appropriately to meet the needs of our customers.
- 5.19 The Landlord Service will continue to be available by telephone, text and email, and a new online customer portal is due to go live shortly, which will make it easier for customers to update matters relating to their contract, to view items such as rent statements and recent correspondence, and to report issues of concern. Whilst we realise that digital engagement may not be an option or preference for some customers, they can also choose to use existing digital channels to contact us, such as Teams, WhatsApp, or the Caerphilly Homes Facebook page.
- 5.20 The majority of the wider Caerphilly Homes team have recently relocated to Penallta House as part of the overarching corporate review of service provision, the rationalisation of corporate office buildings and the delivery of the transformation agenda. The benefits to staff and customers of the wider Caerphilly Homes team being co-located at one office alongside an agile working model are already being realised. Improved working relationships between teams being recognised, removal of some duplication of tasks/functions thereby improving the overall customer journey, and the relocation of the Landlord Service team to Penallta House would support further development of these benefits.

Conclusion

- 5.21 Caerphilly Homes' decentralised delivery model is out of date and no longer fit for purpose. We must adapt to meet the changing needs and expectations of our customers and communities, and to achieve this we need to transform our service delivery model, removing the barriers that exist for some customers who struggle to come into our offices or access services online.
- 5.22 To understand the needs of our customers and communities we need to implement good practice by increasing our community visibility, carry out more home visits, be available at community hubs/other venues, and embed a community-based approach within our teams. We want to encourage more opportunities for customer and community conversations, building relationships and trust.

- 5.23 To reopen our existing housing offices would require a significant financial investment yet the buildings themselves not considered fit for purpose due to accessibility barriers, a lack of facilities and their remote locations etc.. The required operational staffing levels would significantly hinder our aims and aspirations of taking our services to our customers and communities and increasing our community presence.
- 5.24 Although not the reason for this transition to a community-based service delivery model, each of the existing housing offices can be repurposed in some way to meet the need for additional social housing in their respective communities, either by conversion back into a residential dwelling or where the site itself has future potential development potential.
- 5.25 There are challenges to adopting new and innovative service delivery models, but we recognise that doing more of the same is not an option that will meet either our customers ever changing and often complex needs, nor the future aims and aspirations of Caerphilly Homes.

6. ASSUMPTIONS

- 6.1 No assumptions are made in this report.

7. SUMMARY OF INTEGRATED IMPACT ASSESSMENT

- 7.1 The Integrated Impact Assessment (IIA) suggests that the proposals to close the four offices and provide a centralised service to complement agile community-based services will have a positive impact for customers by increasing the opportunities for customer engagement with Caerphilly Homes Landlord Services and reducing obstacles to engagement.
- 7.2 Any negative impacts of closing the housing offices will be mitigated by providing an increased range of options to engage with housing services provided by Caerphilly Homes
- 7.3 By providing opportunities for people to have improved access to landlord Services the IIA shows that the proposal will have a positive impact on equality, diversity and inclusion, on tackling social disadvantage and on promoting the wellbeing of existing and future generations.
- 7.4 [IIA Link](#)

8. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1 The purpose of this proposal is to transition to an improved service delivery model rather than to make efficiency savings. There are not anticipated to be any revenue savings in respect of this proposal.
- 8.2 Not reopening the offices will result in capital savings in respect of repair and maintenance work that would otherwise be required to those buildings and will facilitate redesignation and redevelopment opportunities to address unmet need for affordable housing.

9. PERSONNEL IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 Housing office staff are currently operating out of Gilfach House on interim management arrangements. Should the recommendations be approved operational and management arrangements will be reviewed to facilitate the change to centralised services and community-based provision to improve service provision. There are no proposals for a reduction in staff numbers.

10. CONSULTATIONS

- 10.1 A comprehensive formal consultation exercise of all Caerphilly Homes households was carried out during August 2023 in respect of the proposals, and the results are reflected in the report.

11. STATUTORY POWER

- 11.1 This is an operational decision following a comprehensive formal consultation exercise with contract holders, as required under s.234 of The Renting Homes (Wales) Act 2016.

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Consultees: Cllr Andrew Whitcombe, Chair – Housing and Environment Scrutiny
Cllr Shane Williams, Vice Chair – Housing and Environment Scrutiny
Cllr Shayne Cook, Cabinet Member for Housing
Christina Harray, Chief Executive
Dave Street, Deputy Chief Executive
Rob Tranter, Head of Legal Services and Monitoring Officer
Mark S Williams, Corporate Director for Economy and Environment
Richard (Ed) Edmunds, Corporate Director for Education and Corporate Services
Stephen R Harris, Head of Financial Services and Section 151 Officer
Nick Taylor-Williams, Head of Housing
Lesley Allen, Principal Group Accountant (Housing)
Claire Davies, Private Sector Housing Manager
Kerry Denman, Housing Solutions manager
Jane Roberts-Waite, Head of Housing Development and Strategy
Elizabeth Willington, Area Housing Manager

Appendices: Appendix 1 Caerphilly Homes letter and questionnaire to customers

Housing Office Consultation 2023

During the Covid pandemic the neighbourhood housing offices in Graig Y Rhacca and Lansbury Park and the community office in Holly Road were closed temporarily. During the same period the area housing office in Blackwood was permanently closed, following the end of the lease.

All services previously offered from these locations were made available at the Upper Rhymney Valley Area Housing Office in William Street in Gilfach, near Bargoed and are currently being provided from this office.

At Caerphilly Homes we have been looking at how the change to more flexible working can help us improve our services to customers. We are reviewing how we provide housing services in future and would like your views.

We would like to reduce the need for you to travel to a housing office and provide other ways for Caerphilly Homes staff to be available to you. To do this Caerphilly Homes is proposing:

1. Staff would spend more time out in your communities, bringing services to you, rather than you having to come to us. We could use venues such as local libraries and community centres. Some sessions may be available for you to drop in and others might be by appointment, and we would let you know more about these sessions in the future. More home visits would also be offered by Caerphilly Homes staff.



2. All Caerphilly Homes staff would be based together at one location, Penallta House near Ystrad Mynach. You would be able to meet staff here as well as out in the community. The Caerphilly Homes offices currently in Graig Y Rhacca, Lansbury Park, Gilfach and Holly Road would close permanently.

You would still be able to contact us by telephone, letter, email, or through the Council's website. If you needed to see someone, this could be done at a community venue, in your home or at Penallta House.

We are introducing new telephone systems to help make sure that you can contact the right person when you get in touch. You can also contact us using text if easier for you.

We are in the final stages of developing an on-line portal which will enable you to engage with us on a range of issues on-line if you find that to be more convenient.

It is a legal requirement under Section 234 of the Renting Homes (Wales) Act 2016 that we consult with you on proposed changes to our housing management arrangements that will affect you all, giving you the opportunity to comment, and that we consider your comments before we make a decision on the proposals above.

We want to know what you think about these proposals. We would also like to hear about any venues you think we could use to meet you and others in your community.

We would be grateful if you would tell us what you think by answering a few questions in our survey.

For more information and to fill in the survey, please visit:
<https://conversation.caerphilly.gov.uk/housing-office-consultation-2023>
or point your smartphone camera at the QR code.

For help completing the survey, or if you need a paper copy or an alternative format / language, please

E-mail: tenantinvolvement@caerphilly.gov.uk
or telephone **01443 811433 / 01443 811434**



Survey ends 24 August 2023

Housing Office Consultation 2023

Please give us your views

We want to know what you think about the proposals we have talked about in the leaflet you recently received. As a reminder, the proposals are:

1. Staff would spend more time out in your communities, bringing services to you, rather than you having to come to us. We could use venues such as local libraries and community centres. Some sessions may be available for you to drop in and others might be by appointment, and we would let you know more about these sessions in the future. More home visits would also be offered by Caerphilly Homes staff.
2. All Caerphilly Homes staff would be based together at one location, Penallta House near Ystrad Mynach. You would be able to meet staff here as well as out in the community. The Caerphilly Homes offices currently in Graig Y Rhacca, Lansbury Park, Gilfach and Holly Road would close permanently.

Survey ends 24th August 2023

How we will use your information

You have a number of rights in relation to the information including the right of access to information we hold about you and the right of complaint if you are unhappy with the way your information is being processed. For further information on how we process this information and your rights please follow this link:

<https://www.caerphilly.gov.uk/caerphillydocs/foi/privacynotices/privacy-notice-public-sector-housing-en.aspx>



Q1. This survey is anonymous but it would be helpful if you would let us know the area where you live e.g. Cefn Fforest, Graig Y Rhacca, Pontlottyn?

Area

Q2. BEFORE Covid what was the main way you contacted Caerphilly Homes staff?

Tick one only

- Telephone Email
 Visited a housing office Through the Council's website
 Other (please tell us)

Q3. SINCE Covid what is the main way you contact Caerphilly Homes staff?

Tick one only

- Telephone Email
 Through the Council's website
 By visiting the Upper Rhymney Valley Area Housing Office
 Other (please tell us)

Q4. How many times have you contacted Caerphilly Homes in the last 6 months?

- 0 times (go to Q7) 1-2 times (go to Q5) 3-6 times (go to Q5) 7 or more times (go to Q5)

Q5. Thinking about the last time you got in touch was it to...

Tick one only

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Report a repair | <input type="checkbox"/> Advice on your tenancy |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Advice about rent or benefits | <input type="checkbox"/> Problems with neighbours |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Moving home | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Something else? Please tell us what it was..... | |

Q6. How did you contact us?

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> By Telephone | <input type="checkbox"/> By Email |
| <input type="checkbox"/> By Post Via the Council's | <input type="checkbox"/> Website |
| <input type="checkbox"/> At a community venue | <input type="checkbox"/> Through family, friends or a support worker |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please tell us) | |

Q7. Do you use or have access to the internet?

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Yes go to Q8 | <input type="checkbox"/> No go to Q9 |
|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|

Q8. In your day to day life, have you..... (please tick all that apply)

- Used Facebook or other social media
- Used Video calling such as Zoom or Teams
- Used Online shopping e.g. Amazon
- Used Online banking
- Booked a service or appointment online
- Sent an Email
- Visited an organisations website e.g. Caerphilly Council website
- Used the Council's online services

Go to Q10

Q9. Can you tell us the main reason why? (please tick only 1)

- I don't have a computer/ laptop etc (the equipment to get online)
- I don't have internet at home
- I can't afford to pay for internet / data
- I don't know how to access services online
- I prefer not to access services online
- Something else....? Please tell us

Q10. Please tell us if you agree or disagree with the following:

Caerphilly Homes staff working more regularly in community locations

- Agree Disagree
- Don't Know

Caerphilly Homes offering more home visits

- Agree Disagree
- Don't Know

Have one main Caerphilly Homes office based in Penallta House

- Agree Disagree
- Don't Know

Q11. Please tell us if you agree or disagree with the following:

I/my household will be affected if you close the existing housing offices

- Agree go to Q12 Disagree go to Q12
- Don't Know go to Q12

Q12. Can you share with us why you think this?

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Q13. If there was only one main housing office in Penallta House, how would you prefer to have contact with Caerphilly Homes staff (please tick your top 3)

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Telephone | <input type="checkbox"/> Email |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Post | <input type="checkbox"/> Website |
| <input type="checkbox"/> At a community venue | <input type="checkbox"/> By someone from Caerphilly Homes visiting me at home |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Text message | <input type="checkbox"/> Through family, friends or a support worker |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Social media | <input type="checkbox"/> Visiting the housing office in Penallta House |

Q14. Do you have any suggestions for places within your community that may be suitable for Caerphilly Homes staff to meet with our customers?

If so, please tell us

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Q15. Are there any other comments you would like to make?

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Please return in the prepaid envelope and thank you for taking the time to give us your views