

The Government's Help to Buy housing scheme has so far helped nearly 6,700 people across the West Midlands to buy a new home, official figures reveal.

More than 1,300 of the homes have been in the four Black Country boroughs of Wolverhampton, Walsall, Dudley and Sandwell. The launch of the Help to Buy scheme is also widely credited with boosting the sales and profit figures of the UK's housebuilding companies, although most firms say last year's surge in demand has now cooled down. Since the scheme, which provides

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mortgage guarantees and equity loans to help people buy homes, was launched last April it has helped more than 66,000 households nationwide.

Birmingham Council is the highest performing local authority across the West Midlands - with more than 800 new homes secured by its residents. In Dudley the scheme has helped people secure 379 homes, with 347 in Wolverhampton, 334

in Sandwell and 282 in Walsall. In Staffordshire, 236 homes have been bought in Cannock Chase, with 130 in Stafford, 146 in Lichfield, 71 in South Staffordshire and 122 in Kidderminster and Wyre Forest.

The scheme aims to support hard-working people who can afford a mortgage, but struggle to save the deposit required by lenders in the wake of the financial crisis.

Together with the Government's newbuy scheme, which offers 95 per cent mortgages for those buying new-build properties, the number of new homeowners across the

country has reached more than 71,000. The figures show 81 per cent of help to buy sales involved first-time buyers, helping 54,000 get on to the property ladder.

Prime Minister David Cameron said: "In the aftermath of the great recession, the prospect of buying a first home was nothing more than a pipe dream for many thousands of hardworking people in Britain.

"Even those with a decent salary and who could afford monthly mortgage payments were not able to get on the housing ladder because they could not find a deposit."

King: Help young get on the career ladder



'MAKING young people feel they have been given the opportunity to succeed is vital'.

That's the message from former governor of the Bank of England Lord Mervyn King as he pledged his support to the Express & Star-backed project, Ladder for the Black Country.

Lord King praised the apprenticeship scheme for increasing the number of employment options available for school leavers and enabling employers to see they have 'a wider responsibility in providing opportunities'.

Wolverhampton-educated Lord King was speaking as eight more organisations signed up to the campaign, bringing the total number of apprenticeships since the Ladder was launched just 10 weeks ago.

"Any scheme of this kind is very important," said Lord King, who attended Wolverhampton Grammar School. "In Wolverhampton there needs to be people coming into the labour market with a wide variety of skills.

"The schools have a major role to play in broadening horizons, but so do businesses. I hope employers will see they have a wider responsibility in providing opportunities."

Aspirations

Lord King was speaking during a visit to Colton Hills Community School in Jeremy Road, Wolverhampton, where he spoke with groups of youngsters about raising aspirations.

Describing Wolverhampton as 'the place that made me', he added: "I have a great affection for the city. It was here that I got my attitude and determination. There is a great tradition here, but we have lost a lot of our industry. It is important that we can show areas exist where there are still world beaters.

"The new JLR plant is a big plus. It should help to change some of the unfair and uninformed perceptions about the area."

The Ladder for the Black Country was launched to tackle the problem of youth unemployment in the region which has some of the worst jobs blackspots in the country. The Express & Star has teamed up with such partners as TheVine Trust, Performance Through People and the Black Country Chamber of Commerce in a drive to create apprenticeships and help young people get into work. Patron of the Ladder is the Duke of York who visited Wolverhampton to launch the scheme.

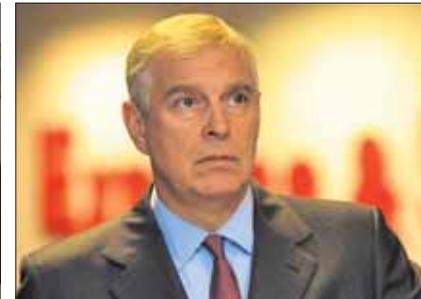
One of the firms newly signed up for the Ladder for the Black Country is Coton Care



Students Dwayson Cave, aged 15, and Rishabh Santoshi, listen to Lord Mervyn King as he talks at Colton Hills School



Tori Bills, 15, talks to the former governor of the Bank of England



Prince Andrew during his recent visit to the Express and Star

Ltd who have pledged to bring through two support workers. Company director Bal Kular said: "We have found in the past that taking on young apprentices is often beneficial for the company.

"The ones we have taken on previously have been dedicated, willing to learn and have come with no bad habits. We teach them our way and they become part of our family. Caring is not a job you can go into casually, it needs to come from the heart and taking on an apprenticeship certainly shows dedication to the work."

Other firms who have signed up include solicitors Enoch Evans and the Arbor

Lights restaurant both from Walsall. Warley steel supplier Barrett Engineering Steel have pledged to take on two apprentices, while Wolverhampton's Gorgeous Radio will bring in three young recruits, including one presenter.

Elsewhere, Superior Sections Ltd, based in Walsall, will hire one apprentice while Brierley Hills Sunrise Medical Limited are also recruiting. AF Blakemore, the company who took on the first apprentice through the scheme, have also brought another youngster on board.

Business development director at Performance Through People, Gill Durkin, said:

"We are really pleased with how things are going so far. We can already see people have moved into work and after just two months some will already be settled so we have got off to a quick start. "One of the great things about the scheme so far is that we have had a mix of large and small employers getting on board across all sectors.

"We want people to see that getting involved with an apprenticeship is a perfectly suitable start to a career and can give amazing opportunities to individuals."

● To offer an apprenticeship, or if you are a young person looking for work, visit www.ladderfortheblackcountry.co.uk

Homeless charity concern over immigration checks

A charity for homeless people has voiced its concern as a scheme requiring landlords in the West Midlands to check the immigration status of potential tenants is launched.

The Home Office was launching the pilot 'right to rent' scheme today which makes landlords and agents responsible for carrying out checks in order to identify if a potential tenant has the right to reside in the UK, before they grant a tenancy.

Failure to comply with the law could result in a £3,000 fine.

Jon Sparkes, chief executive of Crisis, the national charity for single homeless people, said: "It is hard enough for homeless people to find a place to live and we are concerned that asking them to prove their immigration status to landlords could make matters

worse. Homeless people's documents often get lost or stolen during periods of moving around or when sleeping rough and replacements can be expensive.

"In today's high-pressured rental market, landlords are unlikely to wait for a tenant to produce the required documents, choosing instead to rent to someone who can immediately provide the evidence.

"We welcome measures to make it easier for people to prove their identity, as well as the exemptions for hostels and emergency shelters.

"However, our fundamental concerns remain.

"Homeless people must be protected and we will be working closely with the Government to make sure this happens."

Scooter store welcomes queen lookalike for official opening



Mary Reynolds takes to the street

Walsall was treated to a right royal visit from a queen lookalike for the official opening of a new mobility scooter store.

Regal impersonator Mary Reynolds called into the town's new Easy Living Mobility branch.

The actress, who has appeared around the world working alongside top photographers, welcomed customers at the Shaw Street branch and visited nearby Park Street on a red scooter complete with learner plates.

Founder Dan Griffiths said: "Our aim is to take away the stigma that is often related to mobility living. We want to show our customers not just how easy we can make their everyday lives, but how stylish their room setups can still be."

The new 3000 sq ft outlet is situated next to the Crown Wharf Shopping Park off Wolverhampton Street. The business was set up in 2001.

200 jobs created at auction site

BCA, the car auction group with a site at Walsall, is to create around 200 jobs after securing planning permission for a new site.

The company says the site in Perry Barr, Birmingham, was operating as a logistics facility complementing its existing businesses at Castle Bromwich and Walsall and its wider UK network.

The 20-acre site is between Junctions 6 at Spaghetti Junction and 7 at Great Barr of the M6.

British Car Auction's UK operations director, Simon Henstock, said: "We are delighted that planning approval has been granted for the brownfield Perry Barr site.

"It will operate as a full service remarketing hub alongside our already existing businesses at Castle Bromwich and Walsall.

"As the new and used vehicle market expands, we are committed to investing for growth meeting our customers' needs through continuous development of our remarketing services."

BCA's 110,700 sq ft development will include a viewing area for up to 600 vehicles, offices, washing facilities and two auction halls as well as 400 parking spaces.

Work is due to start shortly with the aim of having the site in operation by the end of next year.

MP supporting care campaign

Stourbridge MP Margot James has voiced her support to a Carers UK campaign.

The campaign urges people who are caring for an ill or disabled loved one to take up the assistance that is available to them. Speaking on Carers Rights Day, Ms James encouraged the 10,667 unpaid carers in Stourbridge to find out more about the financial and practical support they are entitled to.

The MP said: "Carers are fulfilling a vital role in our communities, but too often they go without the support they need because they do not know about the practical and financial assistance available. I have visited many of the care homes around Stourbridge, and helped a number of constituents who have come to me for help with caring for their loved ones.

"It is so important that these individuals know how to access the right information and advice about the support they are entitled to."

Mayor gives town hall tour to group

Giving tours of the town hall are all in a week's work for the Mayor of Walsall.

He and a group of former mayors were today treating visitors to a look round the council chamber and the parlour at the civic buildings in Lichfield Street.

Mayor Councillor Pete Smith will then greet representatives from a number of charities tomorrow at 7pm.

On Wednesday the High Sheriff of the West Midlands Dr Tim Watts will visit the Council House in support of this year's mayor's charity appeal at 11am.

On Friday Councillor Smith will be the guest speaker at a meeting of Walsall Pensioners Convention, at Walsall Community Homes' Office, in Burrowes Street, Birchills, at 11am.

He and the mayores, his niece Laura Barnes, will attend the Walsall Healthcare Christmas Tree Light Switch-On event with pop star Noddy Holder at Walsall Manor Hospital at 4pm.

Customs warning on overseas 'bargains'

HM Revenue and Customs have warned Christmas shoppers that online bargains from overseas might not be as cheap as they seem.

Bargain hunters will have to pay VAT on parcels worth more than £15, and customs duty on products over £135.

HMRC's head of customs policy, Angela Shephard, said: "We want to remind everyone how much they can actually bring back from abroad or buy from an online overseas seller without having to pay customs duty or import VAT."

Further information can be found by visiting the gov.uk website.

BIRTHDAYS TODAY

Keith Michell, actor, 88; Woody Allen, actor and film director, 79; Lee Trevino, golfer, 75; Bette Midler, singer and actress, 69; Gilbert O'Sullivan, singer, 68; Stephen Poliakoff, playwright, 62; Charlene Tilton, actress, 56; Jeremy Northam, actor, 53.