

ConTACT

A NEWSLETTER PRODUCED BY TENANTS OF WINCHESTER CITY COUNCIL

ISSUE NO.22 JUNE 2005

TACT HELPS THE COUNCIL LOOK TO *THE FUTURE*

Many of you are aware that the Council has spent the last 18 months reviewing the future of Council housing. This was the result of the Government asking every council in the country to meet the Decent Homes Standard; to look at ways to bring in extra money, improve services and manage the housing service over the next 30 years.

We would like to say a big thank you to all those who attended roadshow meetings across the district last summer, and who read the information in the Council's newsletters and in the last edition of ConTACT. Thank you also to everyone who completed the Test of Opinion survey and returned it to say which Option they preferred. A massive 95% of those who replied to the survey chose the "Stay with the Council" option.

As you can imagine, looking at in-depth financial analysis for the housing service over the next 30 years has not been easy. We received independent advice from the Tenant

Participation Advisory Service (TPAS) and on your behalf we were together able to challenge the Council on its figures, ensure that information was understandable and that the Council remained fair and balanced throughout the process. A group of nine tenant representatives have attended over 50 meetings to ensure that tenants could contribute fully, challenge the Council if necessary and make sure tenants views were heard.

However, whilst we are pleased that the review determined that Winchester City Council would stay as your landlord until 2010, we do have some concerns for the future. After 2010 the Council needs an extra £1 million every year just to keep the service the same as it is now and it will not be able to provide more new housing in the
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TACT on the WEB

TACT has now joined the internet age and you can find out all about TACT (assuming you have access to a computer and the internet) by typing in www.winchester.gov.uk/TACT.

The new service went live at the TACT AGM when retiring Mayor Cllr Cecily Sutton, assisted by Paul Bungey, Chair of the Tenant Participation Compact Monitoring Group, went out with a bang when she hit a plunger to launch TACT's web pages.

Visitors to the website can find out what TACT does, when it meets, who's who and how to join, along with other ways to get involved. There is useful information on other organisations and training opportunities, as well as information on Tenants Associations across the district. You can also find out what are the hot topics that are concerning

TACT and how you can get more involved. There is plenty of help and advice available through the site, which is also crammed with useful documents, which can be downloaded.

Past Mayor of Winchester Cllr Mrs Cecily Sutton takes the plunge, assisted by Paul Bungey, Chair of the TP Compact Monitoring Group, to launch TACT's web pages.



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TACT HELPS THE COUNCIL LOOK TO THE FUTURE

future. However happy we are with the Council now, this will cause untold problems and we cannot just ignore it. You and TACT need to keep thinking about this and, with the Council, look realistically at the future.

It is a complicated situation involving government financial rules that means that 37p of each pound of your rent money goes back to the government each year.

We were concerned that on your Test of Opinion survey results, many of you listed some misconceptions, which we feel you need to know the truth about:

- This review was not because the Council fancied changing things - it was because it was made by the Government to look to meet the Decent Homes standard by 2010 and get the best service for tenants for 30 years into the future. The Council currently has to make cuts of £400,000 a year to continue as your landlord which will rise to £1 million a year after 2010. **This will mean the Council will have to come back to you again in a few years time to explain that they may not be able to continue and to discuss a way forward again.**

- Housing association rents will be the same as Council rents by 2012 because of Government policy. Already your rents are rising faster than Housing Association rents to catch up by this date. **It is not true that Housing Association rents will be higher than Council rents as they have been in the past.**
- The Council had **not** decided how to resolve this problem in advance and genuinely asked you to think about finding a solution within the constraints set down by the Government - your views have been important.
- We agree with you that the Council is an excellent and popular landlord but we need to face facts that it will be difficult for them to remain so if they are £1 million a year short as they will be after 2010.

To finish, thank you for helping us get a tenants' voice in this process and we will continue to keep you updated on the position in the future. Thank you also to all the TACT members who have given up so much unpaid time to scrutinise this issue.

If you want to get involved - please contact TACT on 0800 716987.

GET IT TAPED

If you are visually impaired or have a friend or neighbour who would like ConTACT delivered to their home on an audio cassette, please call Glynis Cole on Freephone 0800 716987 for your copy today. These publications are recorded by the Winchester & District Talking Newspaper Association. Please call the above Freephone if you require a larger printed copy or a version in another language.



TACT MEETING DATES

Meetings are held on a Wednesday afternoon at Makins Court, Alresford from 2-4pm, and in the evening at The Guildhall, central Winchester from 7.30-9.30pm unless otherwise stated below.

20 July 2pm and 7.30pm

**17 August
2pm and 7.30pm**

**21 September
7.30-9.30pm Joint Meeting**

**19 October
2pm and 7.30pm**

**16 November
2pm and 7.30pm**

**7 December
7.30pm-9.30pm -
to be confirmed
Joint meeting - Rent Setting**

**ALL TENANTS AND
LEASEHOLDERS WELCOME**

For further information
contact Glynis Cole on
Freephone: 0800 716987

NEW FORUM FOR LEASEHOLDERS

As a result of the Housing Options consultation a new Leaseholder forum has been created. Launched last autumn they meet in the Guildhall four times a year on a Tuesday evening. The meetings will be informal initially and officer-led with a view to them becoming more formal, eventually electing a committee.

Each meeting will tackle one issue at a time, learning about different parts of the housing service and the level of service they might expect, raising concerns and giving their views on how they can be improved.

The Forum is already tackling concerns about:

- Service charges and the level of detail and layout of invoices and accounts
- Annual/Planned Maintenance consultation and communication
- Customer service and communication with leaseholders generally
- Leases - what they cover and the legal aspect.

If you are a leaseholder and are interested in joining the Forum, why not give the Tenant Participation Team a ring on Freephone 0800 716987.

A TOUGH but ENJOYABLE YEAR

In a joint Chairman's report given by David Cruden and Alan Rickman at the TACT Annual General Meeting, the Chairs reported on a particularly busy year, with Housing Options taking up a great deal of their time.

The Chairs welcomed the new members to TACT and reminded everyone of how many tenants' and leaseholders' groups there were seeking to improve the well being of all tenants and thanked all who willingly donate their time - these members make consultation a reality in Winchester.

This year as in others TACT has had problems getting relevant Council committee papers in time to discuss the contents with TACT members. It is vital that TACT has enough time to go through these papers allowing time to discuss the full implications with all members before making a **TACT comment**.

The Tenant Participation Compact has been redrafted and brought up to date after many hours of intense work and scrutiny and they acknowledged the help and guidance from the staff of TPAS (Tenant Participation Advisory Service). Further work is in progress and the Tenant Participation Compact Monitoring Group (a group of tenants, officers and councillors) is working hard to keep it up to date and meet all the objectives.

Tenants in our **Tenants Associations** are the lifeblood of the community. They know all that is going on in their area. If they have problems they know whom to contact to sort them out. They can help smooth over unfounded rumours, put tenants in the picture and update them when possible. It is for this reason that we invite you to join your local Tenants Association. Your views are welcome and important to us.

Discussions with **Serco** are taking place, as in some areas they do well, but in others we have cause for concern. As talks are on-going it would not be fair to apportion blame, it could be both the Council and Serco have room for improvement and TACT will be keeping a close eye on this matter.

It seems that tenants are pleased to have retained the services of **Nationwide**. However TACT will continue to monitor the service through the Property & Contracts

Forum to ensure that tenants continue to receive value for money and are satisfied with the level of service provided.

We have been receiving mixed reports regarding the standard of cleaning produced by **Connaught Cleaning Services**. Rest assured that TACT will look into this through the Property & Contracts Forum and will endeavour to improve the level of service.

TACT is actively pursuing the problems with **voids and allocations** as it has a direct impact on the Housing Revenue Account (HRA). Some progress has been made but there is still a long way to go. TACT, with the assistance of officers from the City Council will be setting up a Forum to look into allocations and void management and will be attending a training session in the near future before the Forum is set up.

TACT and the Chairs have lived and breathed **Housing Options** over the past year. At times it has been close to breaking point with many hours of their time taken up with meetings. The fact that they are all volunteers is much to their credit. Such an important issue could not be taken lightly. Along with our Independent Tenant Advisors and the Council we have covered all the aspects of Housing Options. We have written to the Prime Minister, the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, and many others to get our points over - in fact it is still on-going.

The final result will have lasting repercussions for the years ahead and, if the result is not what the ODPM (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister) wants, we will be going all through it again in a few years time. Rent restructuring and rent increases will be running in tandem. Whether as Council Tenants or Housing Association Tenants, we will all be in the same boat paying much the same rent by 2010.

The TPAS Annual Conference and AGM 2004 held in Birmingham was extra special for us this year as we set up a stand in the exhibition hall. This was a great chance to put our views over to many of the



TACT Chairs Alan Rickman (left) and David Cruden.

delegates, who in a lot of cases did not have the same chance to communicate with their Landlord as we have in Winchester.

This year has seen the setting up of a **Leaseholder Forum** and we wish it well. It will be a great chance to get Leaseholders' views and opinions over to the Council and Government departments. It is hoped that when the Forum is more established it will elect a representative to join TACT.

The Tenants Handbook is continuing to be reviewed and updated. As procedures and services improve the need to update your Handbook to ensure that it is up to date and relevant is important.

We have done our best to follow the path that we feel you wanted us to take as Chairs of TACT. We have enjoyed our first year and with your approval hope to continue. All it leaves us to do is thank everyone involved in TACT, all the relevant committees, councillors and staff for the time they have given to make our task easier, especially our Tenant Participation Manager Glynis Cole and Tenant Participation Officer Zadia Green, who did us proud.

David Cruden
Chair, Afternoon
Group

Alan Rickman
Chair, Evening
Group

At the TACT AGM Guest speaker, Richard Botham, Head of the City Council's Landlord Services, outlined what had been happening during the two year Housing Options exercise and, in response to questions, stated that the Options process had cost the Council in excess of £100,000.

TENANT PARTICIPATION in Winchester

There are many ways that tenants and leaseholders are getting involved in tenant participation in the Winchester district. All these ways of working together have been laid down in the Tenant Participation Compact, which is reviewed every year by a special panel, to ensure that our aims are achieved and that both tenants and the Council are making participation a reality.

Here we list some of the many forums, working groups and informal meetings where you are making a real difference to the way that the Council deals with housing issues.

Property & Contracts Forum

Issues involving the functioning and monitoring of Contracts & Property Services, Serco, Connaught Cleaning, and Nationwide.

Rents & Business Planning Forum

Issues and involvement in rent setting, the Housing Revenue Account Business Plan, rent communication with tenants, as well as correspondence and lobbying national Government on social housing.

Tenants Handbook Review Group

Updating the handbook; reviewing text policy and considering Tenancy Conditions.

ConTACT Working Party

Producing the tenant's newsletter, updating all tenants and leaseholders of the work of all other groups.



Tenant Participation Compact Monitoring Working Group (TPCMG)

Constantly reviewing, updating, and monitoring the agreement both tenants and leaseholders enjoy with the City Council.

Tenant Associations

Local working groups contemplating both area and social housing issues.

TACT

Two groups, afternoon and evening, monitoring all local landlord services.

Information Sharing Sessions

Representing and providing a voice for Sheltered Scheme residents.

Estate Walkabouts

An opportunity for tenants and representatives from Tenants

Associations to 'walkabout' their estate looking at and identifying areas of concern to local residents. Arranged by a representative from a Tenants Association and the Area Housing Manager at least twice a year, the group is normally made up of tenants, and several representatives from the Council.

A BIG THANK YOU TO DOT

The Chairmen made special mention of Dot Nunn from Stanmore who was retiring after 10 years with TACT. She was a founder member of the organisation and had paved the way to make it the force it is today.

OUR MAINTENANCE CONTRACTOR

You may or may not know that the subject of responsive and property maintenance and voids work carried out by Serco, the maintenance contractor for the City Council, has recently been the subject of close scrutiny. If you did not know, ConTACT brings this to your attention as it has an effect upon you and your home.

There has been consultation between the Serco Project Team, elected members, Council officers and your TACT Chairs. The aim of all this talk is to improve the service for tenants and leaseholder and in so doing, meet both national and local performance indicators. It is vital for us all - contractor, Council and tenants - to make things work. Currently Serco management has undertaken to do its part to achieve the overall improvement to the service.

TACT is therefore appealing to all tenants. *Please make sure that in your dealings with the contractor you follow the procedures explained in your Tenants Handbook.*

It is vital that if an appointment is booked that you are available when the contractor calls at your home. *Please note that a morning appointment could take place up until 1pm and an afternoon appointment could take place from 1pm onwards.*

TACT will also, through the Property & Contracts Forum, press officers for nothing less than full co-operation with the contractor at all times. It is in the interests of us all that the Serco Property Maintenance Contract is made to succeed and you must be prepared to acknowledge your part - a valuable contribution in achieving improvements.

This is why TACT, through this newsletter, is raising the subject and is yet again appealing for your help.

HIGH HOPES FOR HIGHCLIFFE

It is early days yet but we are hoping that the arrival of the neighbourhood wardens in Highcliffe will have a positive impact in the community. The idea is that wardens work in a local area to help make it a better place to live. We have spoken to tenants in other parts of the country where wardens are already working and they have said that wardens were making a difference on their estates. So we have been awaiting the arrival of the wardens here with interest and expectation.

The wardens have begun by clearing up rubbish in the area. They are also getting to know the community, by listening and talking to people. Hopefully, this means that they will be able to respond effectively to our needs. They have held their own "meet the wardens" meeting, and attended the meetings of several community groups, including Highcliffe Tenants and Leaseholders Association. They also joined us on our last estate walkabout, when several ideas were discussed to help solve issues such as street cleaning. They are talking to people on the streets and are planning drop-in surgeries, where people can come and talk to them about any concerns they may have.

The wardens have been listening and talking to young people informally around the estate and in the local primary school. Our tenants association is committed to the improvement of facilities for young people in the area and we are hoping that the wardens will be able to help develop projects for young people.

It is early days yet, but the arrival of the neighbourhood wardens will hopefully open up possibilities of greater community involvement, not only in terms of receiving more effective services, but also in terms of improved facilities and new community projects.

Highcliffe Tenants & Leaseholders Association

SPEAK UP!

If you are interested in what happens to your home and want to have a say, why not join one of our TACT groups or a local Tenants Association? We believe that this is one of the best ways of having an input into the future management of our homes.

Contact the TACT Chairmen Alan Rickman or David Cruden if you want to find out more. You can call them on Freephone 0800 716987 and leave a message, or write to them as follows:

Alan Rickman
101 Taplings Road
Weeke
Winchester SO22 6HG

David Cruden
16 Doctors Lane
West Meon
GU32 1LW

A 'WORTHY' UPDATE

Over the past eighteen months a lot of time has been taken up with Housing Options, with this Tenants Association (TA) helping to spread the word to one and all. The TACT representatives and Chairman of the TA have also been keeping a close watch on other developments.

Within our area we have three development sites planned for new affordable housing. Two to be developed by Hyde Housing Association and one by Winchester Housing Trust (WHT). Work on the WHT site for three general needs bungalows should start mid to late summer. WHT has also agreed to pay for the removal of a standpipe to a more convenient position when they lay down the new parking for the three bungalows. Plans for the other two sites have gone back to the drawing board because of cuts in funding by the Housing Corporation.

A year ago a new company was awarded the cleaning contract for communal areas in flats and sheltered schemes throughout the Winchester district. This is something else we have been monitoring very closely with our Area Housing Manager to achieve value for money for our tenants and there is still room for a lot of improvement. However, estate grass cutting and general maintenance has improved recently - long may it continue.

The Worthy TA is to be one of the first TA's to have a web page of its own containing information on when and where we meet, our meeting dates for the year, contact details, and our latest newsletter. If you have access to the web, why not have a look at it and tell us what you think? (Just enter www.winchester.gov.uk/TACT)

The Worthy TA is open to all tenants and leaseholders who live in the Kings Worthy, Headbourne Worthy and Martyr Worthy area. Tenants who have purchased their homes, and still reside in them within our area, would also be most welcome to attend.

Our meeting dates for the rest of the year are: **18 August, 20 October and 15 December**. Meetings are held in the Lionel Tubbs Community Hall, Mountbatten Place, Kings Worthy and start at 7.15pm.

Paul Bungey
Chairman, Worthy Tenants & Leaseholders Association
Email: pbungey@yahoo.co.uk

SHARING INFORMATION

Simonds Court is one of our Sheltered Schemes which holds Information Sharing Sessions. Supported by members of TACT and officers from the Council, these regular sessions are informal and give older tenants the opportunity to raise concerns about their Scheme, learn more about the Council and meet and share ideas with their neighbours over a cuppa. Hot topics recently have been the standards of grass cutting and shrub borders and general maintenance enquiries, as well as finding out more about the Housing Options process.

Would your Scheme like to join in? Contact Glynis Cole, Tenant Participation Manager on Freephone 0800 716987 and ask her to visit.



Margaret Street (left) and Joan Martin (right) two of the residents of Simonds Court, meet Glynis Cole and Seema Jandu at their recent Information Sharing Session.

SO YOU THINK IT'S ALL OVER?

Well it isn't - Housing Options will not go away. It is for this reason that elected members, officers and TACT will continue to meet on a regular basis to keep up to date on the Government's plans for Council houses, and any further cuts in funding.

The Housing Option survey replies from many of you, said, "stay with the Council or our rents will go up". *How wrong can you be!* TACT went to great lengths to point out to you, that due to Rent Restructuring our rents will end up on a par with Housing Associations by 2010.

TACT said that within the next two years, as a result of the directives from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, Housing Options would again be on the agenda.

The only thing we have gained is time. Housing Options will not go away. A short-term fix is not the answer. The Council has a large shortfall of cash for the next five years, due to cuts in Government funding. Things will have to change and, ways of saving money for the use of priority schemes will have to be found.

Tenants will have to play their part. If you make an appointment with Serco or another contractor, make sure that you are in when they call. Likewise if the contractor cannot keep an appointment, they should let the tenant know, so that time and money is not wasted.

Time and time again Council property is vandalized. It costs us all money every time it happens. That money could be spent on other things for the community. Anti-Social Behaviour Orders help, but it does not say a lot for our community, when a few hold our estates to ransom by their behaviour, spoiling things for others.

The future is uncertain - change of sorts will have to take place. But you can be sure that TACT will keep you updated on any developments, as we become aware of them. It is not all doom and gloom, but like anyone else the Council can only spend money if it is there to spend, otherwise we know what that leads to.

Void (empty) properties such as in sheltered housing are causing problems. Purpose-built in their day but now, in some cases, not up to today's standards. Ways have to be found to get them back in use and stop the drain on the Housing Revenue Account money that could be put to good use.

So you can see much has to be done if you want to stay with the Council - and providing nobody moves the goal posts again in the near future.

TP COMPACT GETS THE THUMBS UP

TPAS (the Tenant Participation Advisory Service) is so impressed with our Tenant Participation Compact that they have asked if they can recommend it as an example of good practice to other councils and tenant groups through their website.

TPAS declared our TP Compact to be "a well produced and comprehensive document which demonstrates a clear commitment to tenant participation in Winchester."

"The fact that the Compact states that one of its aims is for 'the Council to become more answerable to tenants' is excellent. The fact that this statement is made and all parties have signed up to the document shows a commitment from all involved. It also indicates a positive attitude by actually stating that things *will* be achieved."

They continued, "There is clearly a range of consultation mechanisms available to tenants who are now clearly offered the opportunity to be involved at the highest level of decision-making."

