

CONTACT

A NEWSLETTER PRODUCED BY TENANTS OF WINCHESTER CITY COUNCIL

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The TACT team on duty in Birmingham.

50 WAYS TO GET INVOLVED

The TPAS annual conference and AGM held in Birmingham was called *50 Ways To Involve Your Tenants*. From the opening to the closing session, the conference

was once again well worth the time and effort everyone puts in. It was just a shame that the Key Speaker Yvette Cooper from the ODPM (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister) valued her holiday more than our conference. Her replacement at short notice was David Orr from the Housing Corporation, who did a gallant job of standing in, however he was not the person we wanted to question.

TPAS Associate Paul Reeves led the sessions on Choice Based Lettings and Rent Restructuring. He was an excellent speaker who did not mince his words. The Rent Restructuring session led us to believe that in Winchester we are further ahead with our training than many councils.

Once again a great deal of interest was shown in our exhibition stand, especially our letters to the ODPM and the Guardian. We hope we have inspired others to take up the fight for fair play. Our thanks to everyone who looked after it for us; it was one of the best manned stands at the conference.

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All the courses we attended proved well worth the effort. We had nothing but praise for both the food and the excellent staff who served it. 860 delegates is a task indeed - well done! Our thanks to TPAS, Glynis and Seema for an excellent conference.

Alan Rickman
Chair, Tact Evening Group

GOVERNMENT SILENCE

TACT has been chasing the Government to respond to its letter written a year ago about Rent Restructuring. It was addressed to the Minister for Housing and Planning. Since then, total silence. Now recent newspaper reports in Society Guardian have raised grave concerns about what the Government is planning. Your TACT Chairs have written again raising the following points:

1. Awarding hundreds of millions of pounds in debt write-offs to councils that have transferred their homes, but withholding money from those who retain their stock, is of concern.
2. Insisting that the extra resources to achieve the Decent Homes Standard will only be available to councils that relinquish control of their homes is shoddy to say the least.
3. The repeated refusal to allow direct investment in council-run housing, despite overwhelming support from MPs is another disappointment.

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THROUGH THE KEYHOLE



What does TACT do? This is the first in a regular series of articles aimed at keeping you up to date with what the TACT team is currently working on:

Allocations & Voids Forum – We have a vital part to play in this new forum and will continue to monitor the situation with the aim of cutting down on the number of empty properties in the district and improving this part of our service.

Property & Contracts Forum – We keep a close watch on the way contractors perform their duties and monitor Serco and their maintenance contract very closely. We are also keeping an eye on the contract with Connaught Cleaning Services (see article below).

Tenant Participation Compact – Your Compact with the Council is constantly being updated and TACT, along with the Council, regularly

check that targets for tenant participation are being met. The Tenant Participation Compact Monitoring Group is chaired by Paul Bungey and the Group is currently working on a new Summary, which will contain an updated Action Plan, to be delivered to all tenants in the spring of 2006.

Housing Options – There is still a long way to go with this, but we are glad that more tenants now realise that staying with the Council will not be easy.

We will do our best and work closely with the Council, but funding from Government is vital – and they have a habit of changing the rules along the way.

Keep reading ConTACT and keep your comments coming in.

Why not drop us a line so that we can print your letters?

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 716 987 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.

SOCIAL ISSUES UNDER SCRUTINY

Alan Rickman and Cyril Gilbert-Wood serve on a new panel as representatives from TACT. The remit of the Social Issues Scrutiny Panel (which replaced the Housing Performance Improvement Committee) is to critically examine social issues, including housing matters.

However after Cyril and Alan had attended the new panel's first meeting in July, they were very downcast. They wrote to the Committee Chair Cllr Jean Hammerton expressing their concerns and then reported back to TACT. Here are some of the points they made:

"Scrutiny means close search and critical examination. As co-optees and TACT representatives we cannot express any confidence that there will ever be enough discussion time made available, even if there is a sincere desire for this panel to critically examine housing papers.

Housing papers must be given enough time for scrutiny, thought and debate and the time they require, to be worthy of the name given to the new panel."

Housing papers considered by your landlord deal with issues which affect the homes you live in, and it is important that the Scrutiny Panel has the time and the will to critically examine issues in the best interest of tenants and leaseholders.

CHOICE BASED LETTINGS

Choice Based Lettings is a new way of letting properties in an open and transparent way. Central government has decreed that all local authorities must be operating a scheme by 2010. For those working with partners there is some funding available to assist with set up costs. Winchester is looking to form a partnership with East Hampshire, Havant and Portsmouth Councils, with Fareham showing an interest.

A Working Party has been set up consisting of officers, councillors and tenant representatives to look in more detail at this new initiative. The first meeting has been held in Winchester with TACT representation on the panel. More news and updates will follow in the next edition of ConTACT.

CONNAUGHT CLEANERS

The City Council, in co-operation with Connaught Cleaners, has put in place plans which we hope will improve the service, and which will be closely monitored by TACT. Information has been given to Area Housing Managers and Scheme Managers, and is being displayed in communal areas and sheltered accommodation.

If you have any problems or queries with cleaning, please contact your Area Housing Manager, Scheme Manager, or direct through the Connaught Hot Line on 01329 826 006.



JOIN THE HOUSING DEBATE

The Housing Service provided for tenants and leaseholders in Winchester appears to provide satisfaction if one consults Tenant Satisfaction surveys. So, using the maxim 'If it's not broken, then leave it alone', there is little point spending money and effort in trying to improve the Housing Service for the better. Or is there?

Tenants are getting more involved and taking an interest in the management of their homes but frustratingly, many fail even to respond to surveys or correspondence.

There will be occasions when local and central government need to make important decisions regarding social housing in general, and your local housing service in particular. If tenants and leaseholders don't get involved and are apathetic about what happens to their housing service, then decisions will be made with scant regard for our views or preferred options.

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 the best way 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 716 987 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

SERCO UPDATE

In the last edition of ConTACT we highlighted concerns over the work carried out by Serco as part of its Property Maintenance Contract. There has been an improvement, but this still needs to be closely monitored. We still need you to do all you can to make the appointment system work. Please carry on meeting the appointed date, or making an alternative which is convenient to you, and don't forget to complete your Customer Care Card once the job is done. **If we work together we should see a further improvement in our service.**

TACT MEETING DATES

Meetings of the Afternoon Group are held on a Wednesday at Makins Court, Alresford, from 2-4pm, and of the Evening Group at The Guildhall, Winchester, from 7.30-9.30pm unless otherwise stated below:

16 November
2pm & 7.30pm

7 December
7.30pm-9.30pm
Joint meeting - Rent Setting

18 January
2pm & 7.30pm

15 February
2pm & 7.30pm

15 March
7.30pm Joint meeting

19 April
2pm & 7.30pm

10 May
7.30pm
Annual General Meeting

**ALL TENANTS AND
LEASEHOLDERS WELCOME**

**For further information
contact Glynis Cole on
Freephone: 0800 716 987**

THE FUTURE OF SOCIAL HOUSING

Cyril Gilbert-Wood writes: "Housing Options – the issue deciding who is to be our landlord in the future – may seem to have gone away. It may certainly have gone cold at the moment but we must warn you that the issue is not closed – and most certainly has not gone away.

We are not the only tenants struggling with this problem. TACT is in contact with other tenant groups throughout the country putting the case to central government for fairness in the Housing Options process and providing social housing.

Many of the issues raised by other groups of tenants mirror our tenant situation here in Winchester. We have a good landlord, who looks after tenants well. Finance is, as ever, a problem. So can we through this publication remind you that the monies collected from your rent becomes part of the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) and most importantly, for each £1 collected, 37p has to be paid to central government for social housing elsewhere in the UK.

If we in Winchester did not have to pay this, most of our money problems would be solved. Pressure is being applied to local tenants through the Housing Options process and coercion from government sources. This issue in particular is causing distress to many elderly tenants, and it is only right and proper that TACT, using every means at its disposal, should bring this issue to your attention.

GOVERNMENT SILENCE

4. Our sympathies lie with the north-west Leicestershire constituency tenants who claimed they were facing a coerced stock transfer away from a good and successful local authority. In Winchester we share those thoughts exactly.

Their letter was also copied to Winchester MP Mark Oaten, all City councillors, GOSE (the Government Office for the South East), TPAS, the Chartered Institute of Housing, Inside Housing, TAROE (Tenants and Residents of England) and all the TP officers and Tenant Group Chairs in the south-east who face similar problems.

TACT GOES SOUTH

At the TPAS Conference in Birmingham we were approached by Southampton City Council, who were impressed by our stand and liked the fact that TACT works well as a group and plans effective involvement for Winchester's tenants.

Their Customer Involvement Manager has requested a meeting between Southampton's Tenants Federation and TACT to pass on our working practices and to find out more about how our tenant participation structure works.

We will be getting together in the autumn when we will visit their Tenant Participation Unit in Southampton so that we can have a look at Southampton City Council's Resource Centre.

TA ROUND UP

THE WORTHYS

At The Worthys Tenants Association AGM a new committee was elected with representatives from all areas of the Worthys. Our affordable housing sites have now started to roll again after some delays, and we have met the contractors with members of the Parish Council to talk over some of our members concerns. Our Estate Walkabouts are also going from strength to strength.



Paul Bungey (centre) gets ready to lead an estate walkabout.

If you live in the Kings Worthy or Headbourne Worthy areas you will find details of when we meet by logging onto www.winchester.gov.uk/TACT or by calling Paul Bungey on 01962 883 249.

WEEKE

The members of Weeke Tenants & Residents Association are looking forward to working with their new Area Housing Manager, Kate Mooge. The Association (TA) has many concerns that it feels Kate can help with and they are all looking forward to working with her. However, in recent weeks the work of the TA has been overshadowed by the shocking news of a tragic murder on the estate.

If you live in the Weeke area you can find out more about the work of the Association by contacting Alan Rickman on 01962 885 848 or by logging onto the Council's website at www.winchester.gov.uk/TACT.

MINISTERS STALL RENT REFORMS

TACT Chairs Alan Rickman and David Cruden have written to Matt Weaver of the Guardian to congratulate him on his recent articles in the Guardian's Society supplement on rent reforms and council housing.

"Many of the points he raised are so true of our position in Winchester," said David. "We have a good Council, which looks after its tenants well, but 37p of each pound from the HRA (Housing Revenue Account) has to go back to the Government. If this were not the case we would have no problems. We believe that pressure is being put on tenants through the Housing Options process and this in turn causes many elderly tenants distress.

We are proud of the homes that we rent, at what used to be fair rents. The Government seems to have a different idea of affordable to the average low paid worker and pensioner!

If left within council control, council housing solves many of our housing problems. The Right-to-Buy has pleased many but through re-selling, many houses have been turned into student accommodation, thus removing their use as family accommodation."

They thanked Matt for raising many valid issues for council tenants around the country. They said, "We are an endangered species, please keep up the good work."



This edition of CONTACT has been produced by a Tenant team including Cyril Gilbert-Wood BEM, Alan Rickman, David Cruden, Paul Bungey, Ken Gore and Brian Hayes.

