

**TENANT AND LEASEHOLDERS CHAMPION'S BRIEF FOR
COUNCIL MEMBERS - 25 SEPTEMBER 2002**

1. **INTRODUCTION**

My appointment as Champion was approved at the Council Meeting on 1 May 2001 following which I have become a member, by invitation, of the Tenant, Leaseholder and Sheltered Scheme Residents Association (SSRA) committees. I have attended most formal meetings since my appointment. Additional to these I attend as many Resident Association meetings as I can; these are notified quarterly in the Tenants and Leaseholders Newsletter.

2. **ROLE AND FUNCTION**

My role and function is:

'To act as a positive focus for the local community at elected member level in respect of the relevant section of the community or range of activities designated by the Council so as to ensure that full consideration is given to the impact of Council activities and decisions upon the section of the community or range of activities'
(Constitution – Article 10. Paragraph 10.03)

In this role I am authorised to:

'Appoint (at my own discretion) a Panel to support the work where this would not over lap with other established liaison or consultative mechanisms'
(Constitution – Article 10. Paragraph 10.05)

3. **PANELS AND MEETINGS**

- a. Apart from the meetings in residential areas, where attendance is generally poor, Tenant and Leaseholder Panel (T&L) meetings are very well attended and the enthusiasm and commitment of the members is excellent. Issues have been discussed in a sensible and mature way and where comments have been asked for the response has shown a thorough grasp of the matters in hand.
- b. Regrettably, so far some areas such as North Ascot, Chavey Down, Winkfield, Binfield, Warfield, Crown Wood, Crowthorne, Sandhurst and Owlsmoor are not represented on the T&L panel. This is something to be addressed once the new Tenants Participation officer has settled in after being recently recruited.
- c. Leaseholders (2) and an SSRA member represent their respective associations on the T&L Panel that nominates one member to sit on the Social Services and Housing Select Committee. This provision gives the Panel a transparent overview and input in all matters relating to Council property, plus an insight into the wider social issues that exist in the Borough
- d. As a member of the Housing Strategy and Capital Projects and Maintenance Panels I am able to keep in touch with the maintenance and repair of the Council's property and the major projects being undertaken.

2. CHAMPION'S PANEL

I have chosen not to appoint a Champion's Panel yet for the following reasons:

- a. Existing Panels are properly constituted and I am a member of all of them. The Labour Group also has a representative on the main T&L Panel and the Executive member for Social Services and Housing attends meetings regularly.
- b. The Pensions Champion attends the SSRA meetings and makes a very positive contribution to discussions in that group.
- c. I believe this representation to be sufficient in the circumstances and to create an additional 'member panel' to those already in existence would not achieve much in my opinion. However, I reserve the right to keep the matter under review.

3. MISCELLANEOUS ISSUES

Issues dealt with have been wide ranging from those of purely local concern to others of greater social relevance. The following are a sample of matters that have either been dealt with already or are ongoing.

a. Annual Rent Consultation

The last round of Tenants consultation on rent increases for the FY 2002-2003 was carried out to the following timetable, which is now the blueprint for the future.

Tenants Panel meeting	November
Further Tenants meetings	December
Survey Tenants	January for 3 weeks
Survey closes	End January
Analysis	
Initial results available	February
Final report	Early February
Executive briefing	Mid February
Council	Late February
Letters to tenants	Early March
Increase effective from	1 April

5.6% was the agreed rent increase this year before which 35% of tenants had registered their preferences. This high return is considered to be an excellent response.

b. Insurance of household contents

Following the flooding in parts of the Borough in the year 2000 we discovered many Council tenants had no household insurance of any description. A scheme to give tenants and leaseholders insurance cover at reasonable rates was developed following negotiations with four providers. At a joint meeting with tenants and leaseholder representatives on 19 Jul 01 **Lloyd Thompson**

was chosen as the preferred provider. Subsequently all tenants, and leaseholders, have been appraised of the options now open to them and I understand the scheme has been moderately successful. My information is that some residents affected by recent flash flooding in the Borough benefited from taking advantage of this insurance scheme.

c. **NTL AND FUTURE AERIAL PROVISION**

The transfer of TV reception and other electronic facilities to NTL has not been an unqualified success in some areas, especially flats. Although, it is fair to say that some residents have been satisfied with the facilities provided. The financial difficulties experienced by NTL and its subsequent re-organisation has prevented good communications between our officers and the company's management and this has been very frustrating at times.

As notified in the last Tenants and Leaseholders Newsletter the Council is now in the process of brokering a deal with suppliers to install and maintain a communal system for each block of flats across this Borough, when NTL finally withdraw their services. Occupants of flats don't have the same options as house dwellers have to erect aerials on their properties and we want a supplier who will provide a sound service at a fair and reasonable cost to the people affected by change.

The T&L Panel, who will interview all prospective applicants, will choose the supplier to whom the ultimate contract will be awarded. To date five firms have shown an interest in taking on this commitment.

Any new service will allow terrestrial and satellite stations to be accessed and it will be a priority of the Council to ensure a fair pricing structure is arranged prior to any contracts being signed. This will include a clause stating that annual increases in the service charge will be limited to the prevailing inflation rate.

Once a satisfactory conclusion is reached the final system will be operated independently from further Council involvement.

d. **New political arrangements**

The T&L Panel and the Leaseholders Association have both been briefed on the new political arrangements. Whilst they have concerns over future channels of consultation they accept that the recent changes were mandatory and unavoidable. Protocols are being adopted to ensure that papers circulated to the Social Services Select Committees are made available to Panel members at the same time and consultation and communication with our tenant and leaseholder representatives remains a priority of this Council.

e. **Finance Training**

Because of the complexities of the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) and the way by which it operates briefing sessions have been held with Finance Officers to explain the process.

f. **Site visits**

To give Tenant Panel members a wider vision and knowledge of the repair and maintenance of property in the Borough and to view the improvements being achieved regular site visits are carried out. This initiative will continue to be a feature of the consultative process.

g. **Repairs and Maintenance – Audit**

The new Bracknell Forest Services (BFS) is now established and all indications are that having maintenance and administrative services under one roof and in one place is leading to much greater efficiency. The greater flexibility in terms of managing available resources is providing residents with a much-improved service. A recent inspection by the Audit Inspector's Office confirms this. The final report is not yet available but it is known that the investigating team's own survey found that a large percentage of our tenants were satisfied or above with the standard of service they were getting from BFS.

h. **Repairs and Maintenance**

It is no secret that the Council owns an ageing housing stock. This creates financial pressures on the Housing Revenue Account since so many properties are requiring attention at the same time. However, overall it is an established fact that the stock condition is satisfactory.

Eventually the modernisation of kitchens and bathrooms and their replacement must be addressed as part of the decent homes initiative; meanwhile in partnership with our tenants and leaseholders repair and replacement of windows, roofs and porches is currently going ahead to an agreed programme.

i. **Rent Reform**

Concerns exist over the recent Government initiative to rationalise council rents with those of the private sector. The T&L Panel have raised this matter with the Secretary of State by letter explaining their concerns that our tenants might be disadvantaged by changes in the present system. It remains to be seen to what extent tenants are affected by any decisions the Government may eventually make.

j. **Stock Transfer**

This subject has been raised from time to time at T&L Panel meetings. The Council has no plans to transfer its stock although the Government urges local authorities to regularly consider the issue. In my opinion, most tenants would not be enthusiastic in having the housing stock transferred out of Council ownership as in the main they are happy with the service they now receive.

k. **Supporting people**

Various groups have been briefed on the Supporting People initiative that seeks to enable people with specialist needs to live as independently as possible, promoting individual well being through the provision of well planned, high quality, value for money support services. Until specific

proposals are known about how this will work some people are unclear about what exactly the intended changes might achieve in 2003. Some elderly members of the SSRA were quite nervous, after being briefed, suspecting that in the end they would be paying more for less services. Careful and sensitive briefing of those affected will be carried out before any new arrangements are introduced and the Council aims to achieve a seamless continuation of services whatever new procedures are finally adopted.

4. **CONCLUSION**

I encourage member's to read the recently published Housing Strategy that has received unanimous cross party approval. It fully explains this administration's policies and strategy and provides a firm foundation for effective investment and planning in the future. I have so far gained a reasonable knowledge about how our housing organisation works and through this accrued knowledge I am now able to work closely with the T&L Panel and our officers in an advisory capacity in aid of the decision making process.

Councillor RC Edger OBE
Tenants and Leaseholders Champion