

**COUNCIL  
27 OCTOBER 2004**

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**TENANT AND LEASEHOLDER CHAMPION'S REPORT**

1. **INTRODUCTION**

The nature of a brief such as this is knowing what to put in and leave out. The scope of the subject and the statutory nature of so much of its content can be confusing, so by necessity this report is a microcosm of the aspects of housing that have been dealt with over the period since a last report was written. During the intervening period a great deal of work has been carried out by officers and the Tenants and Leaseholders Panel (Panel) members associated with the Stock Condition Survey the ongoing Stock Options Appraisal, the Better Homes study and other issues. Some of the facts and figures in this brief have been taken from documents arising from this work and members may wish to learn more about them out of committee by contacting either the Tenants and Leaseholders Champion or the relevant officer directly.

2. **TENANTS AND LEASEHOLDERS**

2.1 **Panel**

Members will be aware that central to the work of the Housing Department is the way in which it associates with the Panel. The Panel consists of members representing residents, leaseholders and sheltered scheme residents across the Borough and meets regularly, normally every 4 to 6 weeks, or more often as the need arises. The Panel is properly constituted and elects its officers annually. It is an extremely effective sounding board for all housing issues and has been visited by tenant group representatives of other authorities and more recently an officer of GOSE, to observe how its meetings function.

In terms of participation in council matters across the whole spectrum of local government this panel nominates representatives to the HSS&H Select Committee, Berkshire Waste Working Group, Maintenance and Capital Works Committee, Housing Strategy and Best Value Review Panels, the Strategic Partnership Focus Group, etc., and other meetings when invited.

The Panel has regular briefings from council officers including the Chief Executive and more recently the Director of Environment. The Member of Parliament has established meetings on a now regular basis and generally the Panel is kept well informed and can ask for updating by officers on any issue they consider relevant to its responsibilities.

The Chairmen of the Panel and the SSRA were both awarded the National Certificate in Tenant Participation in September 2003 following a year long course at Oxford Brookes University. Besides being an enormous achievement they are now qualified Housing Practitioners and Associates of the Chartered Institute of Housing.

In the last year the Panel has published its revised Tenants and Leaseholders Handbook and has renewed its Compact with the Council.

## 2.2 **Leaseholders**

The Bracknell Forest Leaseholders Association (BFLA) was formed to represent the interests of the 932 flat leaseholders that live in the Borough. This group are also properly constituted and meet separately from the Panel but nominate two members to attend its meetings. Leaseholder issues are often very different from those of council tenants, but any decisions taken that apply primarily to tenants will invariably impact upon leaseholders in one way or another. It is imperative that in the cause of social cohesion the interests of this group of residents are protected and that they are included in all housing policy debates, such as the present ongoing stock option appraisal discussions.

## 2.3 **Sheltered Scheme Residents Association (SSRA)**

The SSRA represents the residents living in the council's eleven sheltered schemes. This community group consist of vulnerable more elderly people whose needs are again different from those of our tenants and leaseholders, although many of these are also elderly. The SSRA meets monthly and although its agenda includes items that affect the whole of housing generally in many respects it deals primarily with issues such as security, assistance with adaptations to the accommodation, use of the scheme accommodation by non-residents and other matters affecting the day to day lives of older people.

## 2.4 **Meetings and attendance**

Meetings of the groups described above are both necessary and often stimulating. They represent real contact between council officers and the people they serve. The Champion's duty is to attend all these meetings and give guidance and assistance when needed. In respect of the SSRA the Older Peoples' Champion also attends and so there is real elected member support to improve or resolve the many issues that arise.

Additional to these meetings the Housing Department organises regular meetings for residents throughout the borough. These meetings are publicised through the Tenants and Leaseholders Newsletters that is circulated to all tenants and Leaseholders. Regrettably, these are not well attended but are nevertheless a useful means by which to judge the Council's housing performance and are an outlet for resident concerns and frustrations.

These meetings are chaired by either the local Panel representative or an officer of Housing Management Services supported by the Housing Officer of the area in which the meeting is being held.

## 3. **HOUSING DEPARTMENT**

- 3.1 There have been a number of significant changes in Housing Department staff in the period under review. However, two specific officers, Mr Tom Hogan, Temporary Assistant Director Housing Services and Mrs Linda Wells, Head of Housing Management have shown very effective leadership in handling these changes and managing the consequences of re-organisation arising from them.

- 3.2 Mr Hogan has now left the Council and Mrs Wells has been appointed to replace him in an enhanced role – Assistant Director (Sustainable Communities) – which has been extended to include community safety. Both these officers are owed a great debt of thanks by this council for their efforts over the last year or more.
- 3.3 We can expect further re-organisation in this department including the development of an inter-service strategy and a new Strategic Partnership which will strengthen the existing links between the Department and other sections of the Council. Full details of these changes are not yet known.

#### 4. **MAINTENANCE**

- 4.1 In April this year Bracknell Forest Services announced good news for all Tenants and Leaseholders in that £4.3M was to be spent on improving homes and estates in the FY 2004/05 with this level of expenditure continuing until at least 2006/07. These improvements will mean:
- All homes will have UPVC double glazed windows within four years;
  - A programme will commence to modernise some of the kitchens and bathrooms in our oldest properties;
  - The programme for replacing obsolete heating boilers and electric warm air systems can be increased;
  - More money is available to insulate and draught-proof homes
  - More money is available to improve common areas in blocks of flats and to improve security.
  - The Council can make a significant step towards meeting the Government's Decent (Better) Homes standard.
- 4.2 Maintenance of the Council's housing stock has been improved over the years and the tenants and leaseholders play a decisive part in planning the priorities by which the money is spent.
- 4.3 For the information of members a copy of the BFS monthly monitoring information is attached, from which can be seen the impressive achievements of this Department in reaching its targets. During this period also it was successfully registered with the British Standards Institute (BSI) as having a 'Quality Management System' that meets the standard laid down in ISO 9001:2000.
- 4.4 Other matters of interest to members are:
- Housing investment for FY 2003/04 – 90% of budget paid out within the FY with some 95% of work completed on site within the same period.
  - Following the success of a windows partnership contract (with Anglia) other partnership contracts (Apollo – appliances/services and Race Communications – aerials) are helping secure the delivery of the increased housing investment programme explained above.
  - BFS role in repairs and maintenance extended as part of the council re-structuring (November 03) to become the Building and Maintenance 'Technical Services' division of the council within the Corporate Services and Resources Department.
  - In response to tenants and the Panel's wishes the maintenance appointment system has been extended to cover all gas servicing work.

- Funding has been secured to procure a new housing IT system, which includes a repairs and maintenance system element and is being implemented now.

## 5. **STOCK CONDITION SURVEY**

The Stock Condition Survey carried out last year was a precursor to the Housing Stock options exercise currently taking place. Some of the conclusions arising from this study were:

- The Council owns a rented housing stock of about 6,023 dwellings and there are an additional 932 leasehold flats.
- 84% of the council's housing was built during the period 1945 – 1979.
- Approximately 40%+ of the stock benefit from low cost UPVC casements. However a large number of dwellings have a mix of window materials – a legacy of past piecemeal replacement (now being rationalised).
- The stock is generally of good design and sound construction and is certainly worthy of investment necessary for on-going maintenance.
- The average Standard Assessment Procedure (SAP) energy efficiency rating of 62 is significantly higher than the national average but even so 23% of stock falls short of the acceptable target of 55 and only 28% achieve the preferred target of 70+.
- Regarding the repair condition, the survey identified an estimated total of 171 properties (2.8% of the stock) would fail the fitness standard, where strictly applied. A figure which is significantly lower than the national average of council owned dwellings of 7.3%
- 2,925 dwellings (49%) are considered to fail the 'Decent Homes' standard in terms of fitness, condition, amenity or thermal comfort
- The survey findings indicate a total expenditure of around £12.6 millions to make the stock fit and decent now; and to maintain the condition of the stock and prevent further dwellings becoming non-decent within a 10 year period (as the result of future deterioration of key elements) a further £13.9 millions is required to 'keep decent'
- It is estimated that a total expenditure of £76 millions is required over the next 10 years to meet both the Decent Homes target and to maintain and improve the whole stock to basic standards of condition and amenity.
- The total expenditure requirement over a future 30 year period is estimated at £149 millions.
- The patterns of funding and expenditure requirements identified by the survey illustrate the impact of recent investment in the stock maintenance. It also demonstrates the growing volume of work required to an ageing stock where the majority of dwellings are now over 30 years old and almost all the remainder will reach that age by the completion of the 10 year programme period

## 6. **HOUSING STOCK OPTIONS**

- 6.1 All Councils that own housing have to demonstrate to the Government how they intend to meet the 'Decent Home Standards' by 2010 as referred to above. This standard has been set by the Government as the minimum standard of decency for council housing generally to ensure that dwellings are fit for occupation by being warm, wind and weather proof and have modern facilities.

- 6.2 To assist those authorities whose properties don't reach the standard the Government has set four options to achieve the target. In deciding the most appropriate option Council's must prove that they have consulted residents and other interested parties widely and this is referred to as the Stock Option Appraisal.
- 6.3 Members will be aware of the 4 options being discussed:
- Stock retained in the ownership of the Council;
  - Stock is transferred to a Housing Association (Large Scale Voluntary Transfer (LSVP));
  - Stock remains in the ownership of the council but is managed by an Arms Length Management Organisation (ALMO);
  - The council enters into a Private Finance Initiative (PFI).
- 6.4 Each option has its restrictions, advantages and disadvantages to influence choice. Most members will have some knowledge of the issues and the Council and Panel members will eventually be well placed to make a valid decision on whether or not to adopt any of the four options. Some authorities have adopted a mixture of options and have not confined themselves to one only.
- 6.5 The Panel are very involved in the appraisal process and have appointed an Independent Tenants Advisor (ITA) to guide them through it. The ITA has already been through an induction process with Panel members and meets with them monthly to bring them up to date and plan future consultation activities and programmes. The ITA has visited all areas and spoken with community groups, carried out surveys in shopping precincts, publishes a monthly tenants newsletter and made himself available to answer any queries through the means of a free-phone number, e-mail or visits to homes.
- 6.6 The Council has recently wound up the 'Better Homes Sub-Committee' in favour of a 'Better Homes Commission' comprising 4 elected members (including the Champion), 4 Panel members, and the Executive Member (ex-officio). This Commission will explore the four options and consult with user groups. At its first meeting it will confirm its Terms of Reference and decide whether or not to appoint an independent Chairman and hold its meetings in public at various locations in the Borough.
- 6.7 The Group Accountant has briefed the Panel and some members who have substantial council housing in their wards, on the mysteries of the Housing Revenue Account and other financial matters that will help participants to make valid financial judgements on the appraisal options when the time comes. The Council has also commissioned a financial consultant, separately, to advise on the consequences of deciding on any one of options and make a forecast of the Council's ability to invest in and maintain its stock over the next 30 years.
- 6.8 There is a great deal yet to be done but Panel members are working hard to understand the process and are in no doubt about their ultimate responsibilities when decision time arrives. Equally, it is incumbent upon members to understand the processes now undergoing in order to make informed decisions eventually.
- 6.9 In housing terms the Stock Options Appraisal consultation is probably the most important task in which this authority has been involved since the new town was created.

## 7. **ALLOCATIONS**

7.1 At the end of July there were approximately 3255 applicants on the council's housing waiting list in the following categories:

- RSL Transfers - 226
- Council transfers - 676
- Applicants – outside Bracknell Forest - 137
- Single applicants - 1120
- Family applicants - 861
- Homeless applicants (to be qualified) - 127
- Senior Citizen applicants - 108

7.1 In the year ending March 2004, 474 Council and 124 RSL properties were re-let.

7.2 A recent update of the Housing Needs Survey, carried out more than two years ago, records a annual short fall in affordable housing of 600+ units with a total of 86 built in the last year. Unquestionably, the problem of how to reduce the waiting list to manageable proportions in the years ahead will not be easy to solve at this rate of development; even though the council's policy on affordable housing arising from developments over 25 dwellings has been increased to 23% with a further 15% of units being earmarked as key worker housing.

7.3 A 'Choice Based Letting' scheme is anticipated but has not yet been considered properly. Such schemes are operating successfully elsewhere and give applicants the choice of choosing a property rather than being allocated one. There are obvious attractions to such a scheme although it must be accepted that the scope and options to choose from our existing stocks are limited. Members will be kept informed of developments.

## 8. **MISCELLANEOUS**

8.1 Because of the Government's rent rationalisation scheme council rent rises over the last two years has been set at 3.6% and is likely to remain at this rate until parity is reached between the rents of the private and public sectors. Up until the scheme started in 2002 tenants were consulted annually on the rate of rises they wanted and the consequences of whatever choices that were made. This worked very well even though invariably tenants chose the lowest amount and accepted the cuts in services arising from this.

8.2 Following flooding in the Borough some years ago the Council supported a Tenants and Leaseholders Insurance Scheme. Member will recall that Jardine Lloyd and Thompson were appointed to operate the scheme. The underwriter being Groupama Insurance. The agreement between the two has now expired and Groupama have decided to withdraw from this sector of the insurance market.

8.3 Jardine Loyd and Thompson have made arrangements for the scheme to be underwritten by an alternative provider, Allianz Cornhill, who will provide cover for all existing policy owners on existing terms and levels. Although there is a 9% increase in premiums. Allianz and Cornhill have maintained the scheme's minimum cover levels at £6000 for pensioners and £9000 for all other policy holders.

8.4 The scheme will be re-launched through the Tenant and Leaseholders Newsletter once the promotional literature is ready. Groupama's agreement had a target providing 600 policies over a period of 3 years but in reality achieved only 170. It remains to be seen how well the re-launched scheme is supported by our residents.

9. **CONCLUSION**

9.1 Members are reminded that Champions are appointed 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'**

Many members have assisted the Champion in fulfilling this function over the period under review and are encouraged to use his services whenever the need arises. The assistance of officers generally across the Council has been essential to the work and the Champion places on record his indebtedness to them for giving him this unfailing help and guidance.

9.2 It is hoped that members find this report useful

**Councillor RC Edger OBE  
Tenants and Leaseholders Champion**

**October 2004**