

HousingNews

TENANTS' NEWSLETTER FROM ASHFORD BOROUGH COUNCIL

September 2005 ISSUE 54



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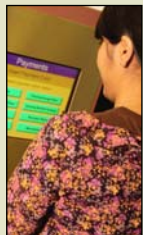


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If you know someone who is blind or partially sighted who would like to listen to Housing News on cassette, then please contact the Editor on 01233 330365.

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A quick word from the Editor

It has been an extremely sad time for Housing Services staff and members of the Tenants' Forum, who have lost a great friend in Berni Cray, the Forum's secretary. Berni died in June after a battle with cancer and will be greatly missed by all. We are also very concerned about the Forum's treasurer, Alpert Thomas, who is very ill. Our thoughts are with him and his family.

On a more positive note, Stella Cowland, the Forum Chair, recently sent a letter to all tenants, appealing for anyone interested in becoming a member of the Tenants' Forum. She has received several responses from potential applicants and is looking forward to welcoming new members at the Forum's Annual General Meeting on Saturday 24th September. Why not come along and see for yourself how hard the forum is working on your behalf?

As you will have noticed, this issue of Housing News comes with our new Tenant Participation Strategy. The strategy outlines our commitment to you and also includes an Action Plan, which explains how we will encourage and support tenant participation over the coming year. Please take a moment to read the strategy and find out how you can become an active tenant in your area.

As you will see on page 7, we are keen to hear your thoughts on Housing News. Are we providing you with the information you want? Do you enjoy reading Housing News? Please complete and return the readers survey to help us to improve your magazine. You could even win a £50 prize in the process!

Finally, many congratulations to Mrs Kath Wood of Willesborough, who took part in our last readers' competition and won a £20 gift voucher.

Philippa Dale Editor

Promote your club in our 2006 Calendar

Are you a member of a community group or local club? Would you like some extra publicity to promote what you do and encourage new members to join? If so, Housing Services want to hear from you.

We are now working on our 2006 Tenants Calendar and we need your help. We want to celebrate the diversity and activity within our borough, by including as many local groups as possible. From neighbourhood groups and after-school clubs to sporting clubs and support groups. Whatever your hobbies or interests, we want to hear from you!

If you would like to feature in our calendar, please get in touch and we will arrange a suitable time to visit and take a photograph of your club in action.

To promote your community group in our calendar, please contact Philippa Dale on 01233 330365



New Affordable Homes

A new housing development has transformed Essetford Road in Ashford, bringing much-needed affordable homes into the borough.

The new development, called Eshet Close, comprises of nine bungalows for rent. It was built in partnership with London & Quadrant Housing Trust, on a site previously occupied by council garages that were greatly under subscribed.



Valerie Proctor receives the keys to her new home in Eshet Close.

Eshet Close was completed in August, when excited tenants finally got to move into their new homes. "It's absolutely brilliant to be here," said new tenant Valerie Proctor, "and I am close to my daughter who lives in Essetford Road."

This development, along with the development of former garage sites at St Stephen's Walk and Hampden Road, will provide a total of 33 new affordable homes for the borough.



The Jubilee Garden has brightened up Bybrook, but how else can we improve the area?

YOU SPOKE, WE LISTENED!
£1million invested in Local Area Plans
Improvements that will see local communities in Ashford transformed into more pleasant, attractive places to live are in the pipeline...and tenants are at the heart of the process!

As you will recall, we recently asked for your views on who should manage your homes in the future. The overwhelming majority of you opted to stay with the council, but you also raised some important concerns for us to address.

In particular, many of you highlighted the need for greater balance in our programme of improvements to both the inside and outside of your homes.

While it is important to continue with our ongoing internal improvement programme, providing you with new kitchens and bathrooms, you felt that it is equally important for us to consider the physical environment of your communities.

So, after listening to your views, we have decided to extend our work on Area Plans, which focus entirely on improving the physical environment of your communities. To kick off the

process, we are going to trial two Area Plans, one in Bybrook Road, Kennington and follow it up with another project in Appledore.

This whole process is dependent on the decisions of local people, so what form this takes depends entirely on you! We want you to get involved and feel a real sense of pride and contentment with the area in which you live. That is why we need to hear from you. What do you feel can be done to improve the environment of your area? How can we build a better sense of community pride? What improvements would you like to see happen? Don't forget, this is your community and at this early stage, nothing is ruled in and nothing ruled out. Please get in touch and share your views with us.

To share your suggestions, please contact Philippa Dale, Tenant Participation Officer on 01233 330365



Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, Sleeping Beauty and Harry Potter were among a host of famous characters who made an extra special appearance at this year's Ashford Carnival.

Stanhope's carnival entry gave young residents the opportunity to emulate their favourite characters for the day.

Members of the Stanhope Sewing Club spent months creating the colourful fancy dress costumes for residents to wear as the procession made its way through town. Thanks to their

huge efforts, Stanhope Disney Characters and Friends scooped first prize in the walking entries group.

Fresh from their carnival win, the Sewing Club is keen to welcome new members. They meet every Wednesday from 1pm to 4pm in the Stanhope Parish rooms, Otterden Close. There is no fee and everyone is welcome.

The repairs hotline is on 01233 330366



Joining Forces

How can we make our estates cleaner and safer? That's the question that Ashford tenants will be asking at this year's Joining Forces Tenants Conference, which takes place at the Leas Cliff Hall in Folkestone on Saturday 19th November.

The annual conference is an excellent way for tenants from across South East Kent to get together, exchange ideas and share experiences.

Presentations and workshops will take place throughout the day, focusing on the conference's overall theme, which this year is 'cleaner, safer estates.' The keynote speaker will be Superintendent Joanna Young, who heads the new National Reassurance Policing

Programme, currently being piloted in Canterbury.

Ashford tenants will ask questions and learn new skills at the conference and you could join them! If you haven't attended a tenants conference before and would like to give it a go, please complete this short slip and return it in the prepaid envelope provided, together with your completed Housing News Readers' Survey.



Violet's bumpy ride raises £180 for charity



At ninety years of age, Violet O'Donnell could be forgiven for putting her feet up and taking it easy. But when Cancer Research announced they were looking for participants to take part in a three-mile run, the Ashford tenant wasn't going to let her aches and pains get in the way of raising money for charity.

Aided by a wheelchair and the support of her daughters and granddaughter, Violet recently joined over 3,000 women for this year's Race For Life in Folkestone.

The Race for Life is the UK's biggest women only fundraising event, with women of all ages and levels of fitness taking part.

"I did it!" beamed Violet, who is a tenant of Luckley House Sheltered Housing Scheme. "It was a bumpy ride, with all the grass verges and kerbs, so I was really pleased when we crossed the line and I could have some water," added Violet, proudly clutching her race medal.

And with a very large family that includes 30 great grandchildren and 32 grandchildren, Violet was never short of sponsors. Thanks to her tremendous efforts, she managed to raise £180, which will go towards the life-saving work of Cancer Research. Violet says she is looking forward to returning next year, but will enjoy the race as a spectator instead.

I would like to attend the Joining Forces Tenants Conference on Saturday 19th November 2005.

Full Name:

Address:

Daytime telephone number:



Remembering Berni

It is with great sadness that we report the death of a much-loved member of the Ashford Borough Tenants' Forum.

Berni Cray served as a member of the Tenants' Forum for four years and had also been an active member of the Kennington Community Forum since it was established.

Berni died in June after a long battle with cancer. "Berni was a valued member of the Forum and a good friend to everyone," said fellow Tenants' Forum member Pat Pearman. "She loved her family who were very important to her. If she believed she was right, she would defend her point of view to the end, she enjoyed life to the full, and was also very thoughtful," added Forum Chair, Stella Cowland.

It is fair to say that everyone is missing Berni, particularly her infectious laugh. Friends and colleagues recently gathered at the Jubilee Gardens in Bybrook Road to plant a rose in her memory.

A Gateway of Knowledge at the Tenants' Forum AGM

Ever wondered what the Tenants' Forum actually does? If so, this is the perfect opportunity for you to find out. Come along to the Forum's annual general meeting on Saturday 24th September, from 10am to 12pm, in the River Room at the Stour Centre, Tannery Lane.

The main speaker this year will be Rosie Arias-Dumeige, Project Officer for the new Ashford Gateway Centre, which opens in Park Mall on 27th September.

The Gateway Centre will allow members of the public to access a wide variety of services from Kent County Council, Ashford Borough Council and other key organisations, all in one central location. Among the many services available will be housing advice, access to voluntary

organisations, health promotion and public Internet access with the latest touch screen equipment. "The Ashford Gateway is about joining up public services to create a better experience for the customer and enhance the quality of life for local people," explains Rosie.

To find out more about the new Gateway Centre and to hear all about the work of the Tenants' Forum over the past year and their plans for the future, come along to the AGM.

Are you using the correct payment card?

If you are using the wrong rent payment card, your account could go into arrears as a result!



That's the warning from Housing Services following a number of cases of tenants using invalid cards.



Housing Services

Stanhope in BLOOM

The enthusiasm, dedication and hard-work of Stanhope's very best gardeners has been rewarded, following the official prize-giving of the Stanhope in Bloom garden competition.

The green-fingered residents of Stanhope pruned their gardens to perfection in preparation for a visit from the competition judges. Judging the competition were KCC Councillor Derek Smyth, borough Councillor John Holland, Parish Council Member Tony Fagg and Housing Services Officer, Barry Moss. The judges toured the estate, inspecting the colourful display of flowers and plants on show.

The annual competition is organised by Housing Services and sponsored by B&Q and Housing Services. Prizes were awarded for the best front or rear garden and best container or hanging basket display. The winners and runners up received B&Q gift vouchers.

First place in the garden competition went to John McAllen of Newenden Close, Stanhope. Followed closely in second place by Anne Town of Lynsted Close. Winner of the hanging basket category was Mrs Richards of Newenden Close, followed in second place by Marie White of Crundale Close.



The green-fingered residents of Stanhope celebrate their prize with Jason Docherty, Store Manager of the Norman Road B&Q Store.

The new style rent payment card provides more convenient ways of paying your rent. Not only can you pay through the Post Office or at the Civic Centre, but there is also the opportunity to pay at Paypoint and Payzone outlets. It is easy to check that you are using the correct card, as the new card has the Post Office, Paypoint and Payzone logos on the reverse side, whereas the old card only has the Post Office logo on it.

*Please ensure that all Housing rent payments are made using this new card only. The old card is no longer valid and any payments made with this card will cause delays in reaching your account and could potentially cause your account to go into arrears. **If you are using the old rent payment card, please contact the Housing Service Team now on 01233 330688 to order a new one.***

The housing services team is on 01233 330688





Rent Arrears Crackdown

At Housing Services, we recognise that late rent payments affects all our tenants. That is why we are working hard to ensure the maximum amount of rent due is collected.

“Tenants who fail to pay their rent have an impact on all tenants,” explains Rebecca Smith, Housing Operations Manager. “As less money collected means less money spent on home repairs and improvements.”

There are many reasons why a tenant may fall behind with their rent payments and we are committed to providing help and advice to those who genuinely need it, while taking tough action against those who abuse the system. Here’s some advice to ensure your rent is paid on time...

Where can tenants pay their rent?

Payments can be made at any Post Office, PayPoint or PayZone outlet, over the telephone 24 hours a day, online at www.ashford.gov.uk, at the Civic Centre in Tannery Lane or by Direct Debit. For tenants who have access to a Bank or Building Society account, Direct Debit may be the most reliable

and secure way of paying your rent. Please contact the Housing Services Team to alter your method of payment. Don’t forget, rent is due weekly in advance every Monday and it is every tenant’s responsibility to pay on time.

What is Housing Services’ procedure for dealing with rent arrears?

Any tenant experiencing difficulties paying their rent should contact us immediately. Don’t allow the situation to get out of control, we are here to help and do not want tenants to lose their homes unnecessarily. We can provide advice on paying your rent or how to make a claim for Housing Benefit and work with you to agree a practical repayment agreement for unpaid rent.

Each week the Area Managers in the Rent Collection Team monitor rent accounts that are in arrears. They look at what rent is due, what has been paid, any



outstanding claims for housing benefit or if an agreement to pay the arrears has been breached. The Area Managers will each make decisions about the next course of action to be taken; this may be a home visit, a letter or a referral to the County Court for possession of a property. This is always a last resort and we use all options available to us to prevent this course of action. Taking tenants to court is costly to them and us and will also result in distress for the tenant and their family, as they potentially face eviction.

What help is available to pay the weekly rent?

If you are unemployed or receiving a low income through paid employment, you may be able to apply for Housing Benefit. Although anyone can apply for Housing Benefit not everyone will qualify. To find out if you are entitled to help,

you must complete a claim form and return it to the Civic Centre. Claim forms can be collected from the Civic Centre or your local Job Centre. If you are entitled to Housing Benefit, the amount you are awarded will be deducted from your full weekly rent, leaving you the difference to pay. You will be notified of your entitlement in writing.

To avoid an unnecessary overpayment of Housing Benefit you must inform Benefit Services of any changes in your circumstance, even if you are not sure whether the change will alter your benefit entitlement.

If you have any questions about paying your rent, rent arrears or making a Housing Benefit claim, please contact the Housing Services Team on 01233 330688 or email housing@ashford.gov.uk

Your Questions Answered

We want to use this space to answer the most common questions raised by tenants, so, if you have a question that Housing News can answer, get in touch! Send your questions to Philippa Dale, Housing News, Ashford Borough Council, Civic Centre, Tannery Lane, Ashford, Kent TN23 1PL.

Can I contact Housing Services by email?

For those of you with Internet access, we have two convenient email addresses that you can use

to contact us. Any general housing queries should be sent to housing@ashford.gov.uk and any repairs queries should go to repairs.housing@ashford.gov.uk. We check your email correspondence daily.

Is there any legislation that limits the time of day a bonfire can be lit?

Anyone thinking of building a bonfire should think of their neighbours and wait until evening or make other arrangements for disposing of unwanted material. Many people do not realise how annoying the smoke from bonfires can be to people living nearby.

If there is no alternative to burning, the number of bonfires should be kept to a minimum and the following code of practice adhered to: Bonfires should only be burnt between sunset and 10pm.

Only burn green waste when it is completely dry, so that it burns quickly and with the minimum amount of smoke.

It is advisable to notify neighbours of your intentions so that they may close windows or remove washing from clothes lines.

For more information and to obtain a copy of our Bonfires Code of Practice, please contact

our Environmental Protection Unit on 01233 330231.

How can I make sure my home is warm this Winter?

To ensure your heating is working properly when you come to need it this Winter, the best time to check it is NOW! Take just 10 minutes to test that your heating system and radiators are working properly. Don’t wait until you need it, to find out that your heating isn’t working properly.

If you encounter any problems, contact the repairs hotline on 01233 330366.



The repairs hotline is on 01233 330366

Housing News Readers' Survey

Tell us what you think of Housing News and you could win a £50 gift voucher!



This is your magazine and we want to know what you think of it! We hope you enjoy reading Housing News and that it provides you with the information you need and in a format you like. To make sure we are getting the

balance right, we want to hear your views and comments. Please take a few minutes to fill in this survey and you could win a £50 gift voucher!

We ask you to rate things on a scale of 1 - 5 where:

- 5= very good
- 4= good
- 3= average
- 2= bad
- 1= very bad

Q1 On a scale of 1- 5 what do you think of the overall content of Housing News?

Q2 On a scale of 1- 5 which parts of Housing News do you find most useful or interesting?

- Tenants' stories
- Information about repairs/improvements to your home
- Tenants' Forum news
- Information about your tenancy

Information about the running of Housing Services.....

Q3 What would you like to see more of in Housing News? E.g. Tenant stories, Profiles on estates/neighbourhoods and villages, advice on home DIY.....

Q4 Do you like the overall look of Housing News? Yes..... No.....

Q5 Do you find it easy to read? Yes..... No.....

Q6 Is there anything you think is missing from Housing News? Or anything you would like to change? Yes..... No..... If yes, please let us know your comments.

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Age Range
16-24.....
25-34.....

- 35-44.....
- 45-54.....
- 55-64.....
- 65+.....

I have completed the Housing News Readers' Survey and would like to be entered into the prize draw for a £50 gift voucher.

Name.....

.....

Address

.....

.....

Post Code

Daytime Telephone Number

.....

The information you provide will be used solely to improve the appearance and



content of Housing News. All completed forms will be entered into the prize draw for a £50 gift voucher. **Closing date for entries is 31st October 2005. Entrants must be aged 16 or over.**



Ashford Tenants Quizzed

Tenants' Forum members recently had their general knowledge put to the test at a quiz night attended by over 50 tenants from across South East Kent.

The quiz took place in Dover and saw tenants from five councils battle it out through ten rounds of general knowledge questions. Former Ashford Housing Manager, Pat Meakins once again took on the role of quizmaster. The quiz gave our hard working forum members the chance to let their hair down and chat with other tenants, as well as enjoy a

fish supper at half time!

The Ashford tenants did well in the quiz finishing in third place, but were pipped to the post by teams from Thanet and Dover who took first and second place respectively.





Stanhope's young artists get creative

Young people in Stanhope got the opportunity to show off their creative talents this summer, as part of a series of art workshops.

Expert advice was provided by professional graffiti artist Graham Upton, who assisted the budding artists, helping them put their ideas into action. And with face painting and art projects supplied by Surestart, the fun didn't stop there!

Once completed, the vibrant and eye-catching artwork will be fixed to fences surrounding the

demolished Bredgar and Luddenham flats site.

The workshops were part of a much bigger initiative, aimed at encouraging younger members of the community to get involved in the PFI process. "We believe it is important to develop a rapport with the children and young adults in Stanhope," explained Housing Services' Paul Mckenner. "We hope to build on events such as

these to increase their involvement in the whole redevelopment process."

Ashford Borough Council has expressed confidence in swiftly finding new partners for the regeneration of Stanhope after a successful market sounding day took place in July, attended by over a hundred people representing potential bidders from the private sector.

The market sounding day was organised following high levels of interest from prospective bidders after the announcement in May that the Council had terminated its relationship with Partners for Improvement in Ashford (PFIA).

The day comprised of a walkabout at Stanhope to promote further understanding of the particular issues facing the estate, followed by a series of presentations in the Council Chamber. This enables the Council to cover every aspect of the project from planning issues to community engagement.

Can you beat Rosemary's record? The search is on to find our longest serving tenant, could it be you?

Rosemary Weller has been a tenant of Ashford Borough Council for 51 years! The life-long Ham Street resident moved into Carters Wood, in April 1954 and it's been her home ever since. But have you been a tenant for longer? If so, we want to hear from you. Tell us your story and you could win a prize.

Please contact Philippa Dale on 01233 330365.



Rosemary Weller with the original roses she planted 51 years ago!

Looking out for you

Help is at hand for vulnerable and elderly tenants struggling to maintain their housing tenancy.

Although capable of living independently, many tenants require additional support from time to time. This is where Hyde Housing's Floating Support can help.

Hyde Housing will provide you with a dedicated Housing Support Officer, who can offer help and advice on a wide variety of issues from welfare benefits to tenancy matters. They will help you resolve any difficulties, so that you can continue to do things for yourself. You will have complete responsibility for the decisions and choices made. Your

Housing Support Officer will agree a support plan with you, identifying what support will be provided and for how long. The plan is reviewed every three months.

The programme is expected to last for up to 18 months, but this is flexible and can be for a shorter or longer period, depending on your requirements and support needs.

For more information on how you can receive Hyde Floating Support please call 01622 356488.



The housing services team is on 01233 330688