

September 2003
Issue 46

housing *news...*

FROM ASHFORD BOROUGH COUNCIL



How tenants are getting involved in the future of their estates ◀ **PAGES 4&5**

Make the most of autumn's harvest ◀ **PAGE 6**

Last collection

The move towards easier and safer methods of rent collection for Ashford Weald tenants has resulted in a decision to withdraw rent collectors. They will make their last rounds at Christmas.

The decision follows a decline in the number of tenants using rent collectors since the introduction of Direct Debit in March 2002 and has been discussed with the tenants' forum and staff.

Direct Debit offers tenants a convenient, safe and guaranteed method of paying rent. It is also much cheaper than using rent collectors – one of the most expensive payment methods on offer.

The council reviewed all of its rent payment methods after Direct Debit was introduced, looking at how many people used each method and how much it cost.

Everyone affected by the change will be sent advice on alternative payment methods, and tenants can ring the Customer Services Team for help on 01233 330688.

Encouraging tenants to use payment methods such as Direct Debit is in line with government proposals to pay all welfare benefits and pensions into a bank, building society or post office account by October 2004.

Handy to know

The Ashford Borough Tenants' Handbook will be delivered soon to Ashford Weald tenants throughout the borough.

The updated handbook contains useful information on all aspects of your tenancy and has been designed to be as clear and easy-to-understand as possible.

If you wish to comment on the handbook, or suggest information that should have been included, contact Jan Smith using the address on the back page of the magazine.

The Repairs Hotline is on
01233 330366

Why paying rent is good for you



The Civic Centre cash office is one of the payment options

New rent collection procedures have been introduced by Ashford Weald to ensure the best possible housing service, help for those who need it and tough action against those who try to abuse the system.

After a thorough review of the way rent and rent arrears are collected from tenants, AWHS has confirmed its 'zero tolerance' policy towards tenants who could pay their rent but choose not to do so.

The new procedures are designed to ensure that the maximum amount of rent due from tenants is collected. This will mean that the money is available to allow Ashford Weald to continue providing the best possible service.

Q. Why is it important to collect rent and arrears?

Rent for council houses and garages is used to provide tenants with a high quality housing service. Every time someone chooses not to pay it has an impact on the money that is available to provide the service to everyone else.

Q. What happens if a tenant is finding it difficult to pay their rent?

Any tenant who has difficulty in paying their rent, for whatever reason, should contact the Customer Services Team immediately. The Customer Services Team is able to offer advice about how to pay rent and how to claim for Housing Benefit and can help tenants agree practical arrangements for pay any arrears of unpaid rent.

Q. Where can tenants pay their rent?

The council has made sure that there is a variety of convenient payment methods available. Rent can be paid at any Post Office, PayPoint or PayZone outlet, at the cash office within the Civic Centre in Tannery Lane, over the telephone and the internet, by debit or credit card or by monthly direct debit. Don't forget that rent is due weekly in advance every Monday and that it is every tenant's responsibility to pay their rent on time.

Q. What action is taken against tenants who don't pay?

Ashford Weald will consider the individual circumstances of every tenant but will demonstrate 'zero tolerance' towards tenants who are able to pay their rent but simply choose not to.

If a tenant fails to make and keep an agreement to pay any rent or rent arrears due, Ashford Weald will begin action to repossess their council house or garage. If the borough council is forced to start Court proceedings to repossess a council property then the costs will be charged to the tenant, who could face a large bill, as well as the distress of facing the loss of their home.

Anyone who is having difficulty paying their rent should get in touch immediately. Ashford Weald is here to offer help and advice to prevent tenants losing their house or garage and can be contacted on 01233 330688 or by e-mailing awhs@ashford.gov.uk.

Is CBL a success? You choose!



Choice-based lettings – tenants speak out:
"It's so much better to see where the properties are before I apply for one"
"I like having details of all the property"
"This is much better than the old system"

Ashford's new choice-based lettings scheme is a great success – but don't take our word for it!

Feedback from tenants shows that the new way of keeping people informed about what homes are available for rent, introduced in September 2002, has been well received.

One person who was full of praise for the scheme was 77-year-old Mrs. Katherine Howland, who moved from her home in Summer Leeze to a newer, south-facing property in nearby Summer Leeze Gardens.

"I was really delighted with the way it worked for me," said Katherine. "It is a much better scheme because tenants know what is available – and that makes it much easier to find what you are after. I am really looking forward to seeing more of the sun!"

The fortnightly property newsletter introduced as part of choice-based lettings gives a brief description of what is available, what features each home has and the number of people it can house. It is sent to applicants on the housing needs list together with a 'results list' which details the group and number of points of those applicants who successfully applied for property on the previous list.

It means applicants know what property is available and the sort of points needed in order to stand a chance of applying successfully for a particular type of home.

Changes are still being made to the system in order to 'fine tune' it to what prospective tenants find works best.

One comment made by tenants had been that giving the group and points level of successful applicants did not show the demand for each property. To make that clearer, the 'results list' now shows the total number of people who applied for each property, helping applicants to build up a clear picture of the demand for housing of different types and in different areas.

Other Registered Social Landlords have now agreed to advertise their property within the newsletter, and their early concern that this could lengthen the 'void time' between lettings has not turned out to be a problem. New homes and shared ownership properties are also now included within the newsletter, which makes it easier for Ashford Weald to identify people who are thinking about buying.

Despite the success of the scheme, demand for housing increases daily and means that only those with the highest degree of need and the highest points levels are likely to be successful.

Recent changes to the Housing Act have led to a review of the transfer system which will allow those with the greatest need to be more clearly identified but will also make it harder for those with lesser needs to obtain a transfer.

Into the future

Multi-million pound redevelopment plans for Stanhope have taken another step forward with the news that Partners for Improvement in Ashford looks set to carry out the work.

The PIA consortium is now the only bidder left in the process after other interested consortia decided not to compete for the work, mainly because of the high costs involved in putting together a bid against such a strong competitor as PIA.

The consortium is already carrying out a housing PFI in the London borough of Islington and is the sole bidder for PFIs in Camden, Newham and Lewisham.

Ashford Borough Council made strenuous attempts to encourage bids from other consortia but is confident of the commitment of PIA and of the consortium's ability to carry out the Stanhope project successfully. Putting together a bid costs around £500,000.

Full details of the PFI process have been published in the Stanhope PFI News – a newsletter which was delivered to homes throughout the area in mid-August. The publication also included information from PIA outlining their initial thoughts.

Meetings are being held for the people of Stanhope to allow them to discuss the PFI and say what they think should happen to the estate. For further details of future meetings contact Linda King on 01233 330419.



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Helping to make a difference

Ashford Weald has always encouraged tenants to play an active part in the area in which they live.

The Ashford Borough Tenants' Forum provides an ideal opportunity for people to get involved in all sorts of new initiatives designed to make life better throughout Ashford's housing estates. Community forums provide more local opportunities for tenants to 'make a difference'.

Tenant Participation Officer Philippa Dale pointed out: "Ashford Weald does all it can to give tenants a chance to play their part in the way their homes are run. The aim is not just to have meetings but to make a real difference by working with the council to improve our estates in real, practical ways."

In this edition of Housing News some of those people who are involved in tenant groups in Ashford explain what they have been doing and why they think it is important.

BERNI CRAY

"I became a member of the tenants' forum a year ago and a member of the Kennington Forum Group in June.

Both of these organisations allow tenants like me to work towards the aim of helping local residents to improve conditions and facilities."

Within the Kennington Forum, a number of different groups are looking at ways of achieving this.

I am working with Derek Sorrel and Pat Boorman on ways of helping the elderly, while other groups are looking at anti-social behaviour, the environment and facilities for young people.

As a group, the first aim has been to obtain funding for the erection of three youth shelters in Kennington. We hope to have more details of this project in the next newsletter – watch this space!"

PAT BOORMAN

"I am a member of the Bockhanger and Bybrook Steering Group, which organises a 'walkabout' before each meeting in order to see whether or not improvements we asked for at the last meeting have been carried out or so that we can find out why they haven't been



done.

The group recently raised the state of the pavements as an issue. They have now been resurfaced and drop kerbs installed – a good example of the sort of improvements that can be requested and carried out.

I also sit on the Kennington Community Forum, a group which is working on a number of projects with the Towers School and with other sections of the local community.

The steering group has a number of teams dealing with different issues throughout the borough. As a member of the group working on 'Care and Support of the Elderly', I successfully asked for a bench to be placed in Beecholme Drive so that older people



Being consulted on new play areas is one way in which tenants' groups get involved

could rest on the way back from the shops and the bus stop. Nick Watkins at Ashford Weald has agreed that this will be provided.

I have also been involved in a successful bid for funding for a community garden in Bybrook Road, and work will soon be starting on this project. The steering group has also applied for 'Community Champions' funding to help the Young at Heart Club which meets at Bockhanger Community Hall.

The steering group has done a great deal of valuable work in helping to provide good activities for the whole community at Bockhanger and I am pleased to have been able to work as part of that team."

STELLA COWLAND

"As well as being a member of the tenants' forum, I am treasurer of the



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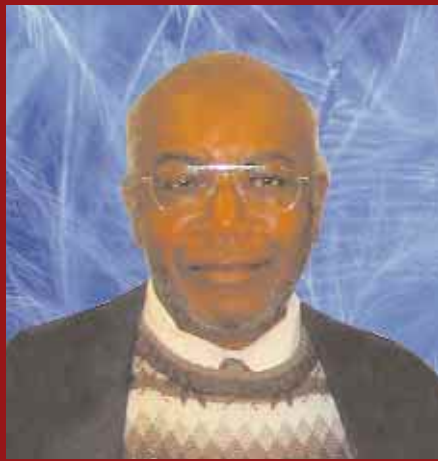
Willesborough Community Forum, a group which has the aim of making Willesborough a better place in which to live.

The first thing the forum did was to look into the needs of the elderly in the area and produce a report setting them out. Willesborough has the second largest number of elderly people within the borough.

The group is also looking at the needs of young people in Willesborough and has formed a Community Centre Forum of which I am vice-chairman. Our first task will be to persuade the borough council that there is a need for a community and youth centre in the area.

My view is that Willesborough needs a youth centre because at the moment youngsters have nowhere to go. I am pleased that there is a forum which allows me to express that view and to work with others to improve things for everyone."

ALPERT THOMAS



"One issue that the tenants' forum is working on at the moment is the need for a music workshop for young people in Ashford.

Our first needs is for a venue for the workshop, and I would be very pleased to hear from anyone who can help with this. They can contact me on 01233 642503.

As with all tenants' forum issues, we need as much input from the community as possible so that we can work together to improve the situation for everyone."

Learning to help



One of the most important aims of the Tenant Participation Compact agreed between Ashford Weald, the borough council and tenants is to make sure that people who serve on tenants' groups are given the skills they need.

Training in a number of skills is organised throughout the year, and tenants are encouraged to learn more about their voluntary roles.

This picture shows Stella Cowland, the treasurer of Willesborough Community Forum, Alpert Thomas, treasurer of Ashford Borough Tenants' Forum and Berni Cray, the new Secretary of the ABTF, taking time out during a two-day course at the National Tenants' Resource Centre at Trafford Hall, Chester.

Anyone who is interested in playing a part in the Ashford Borough Tenants' Forum or in joining one of the more local groups should contact Tenant Participation Officer Philippa Dale on 01233 330365.

Everybody needs good neighbours...



After 35 years as a Good Neighbour in Shiplands, Pluckley, Miss Hilda Buss is enjoying a welcome retirement.

Miss Buss began as a Good Neighbour in 1968, one of a number of people employed by Ashford Borough Council to keep an eye on elderly tenants in groups of bungalows across the borough.

The scheme saw the council installing telephones in the homes of Good Neighbours, who were then able to call out a relative, doctor or other help if there were a problem with one of the people within their neighbourhood.

Miss Buss, who acted as a Good Neighbour for the eight bungalows at Shiplands, was one of a dwindling number of people still doing the job. Most of them have been replaced over the years by the Piper Lifeline emergency system installed in most of the sheltered homes throughout the borough.

She retired in the summer after 35 years keeping an eye out for others, and moved with her pet budgie to Charing Court Residential Home, where she is now enjoying being looked after herself.

Now 91, her retirement was marked by a visit from Ashford Weald Welfare Support Officer Eve Mason, who presented Miss Buss with a bouquet of flowers.

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Understanding the product



Lettings Officers Vicky Hammond and Donna Fincham gained a first-hand insight into some of the property that will shortly be on Ashford Weald's books when they toured building work at Turner Close, Newtown.

The girls had a chance to see work in progress on some of the partially-completed homes being built on the old Gas House Fields site, now cleaned up and due to provide 45 properties by the end of the year.

Because of the site's history there will be no individual gardens at the development, which will provide flats and bungalows for residents with special needs as well as for those on the general housing needs list.

The Southern Housing Group is building the properties for rent, with the borough council having nomination rights for all of the homes.

Autumn recipe

Autumn is the traditional time for making chutney as it makes the most of surplus apples, tomatoes, plums and other fruit. The word comes from the Indian Chatni, which means a spicy sauce or condiment.

Chutney is excellent with cheese and cold meats and benefits from being kept for a few weeks before eating to allow the flavours to mature. Make some now and it will be excellent to accompany the left-over turkey and ham at Christmas...

APPLE CHUTNEY

2lbs/900 grams of cooking apples
1lb/450 grams brown sugar (demerara or soft brown)
8oz/225 grams of dried fruit (raisins, sultanas or dates or a mixture of these)
8oz/225 grams onions
1 pint malt vinegar
2 tsp salt
1 tsp ground ginger
2 tsp mustard seed

METHOD:

Use a stainless steel or aluminium pan which is large enough to hold all the ingredients easily.

Peel, core and chop apples roughly, peel and chop onions. Roughly chop the dried fruit, add all ingredients to



pan and stir, heating gently until the sugar has dissolved. Simmer slowly for at least two hours, stirring occasionally. The chutney will thicken and the amount in the pan should have reduced. If the chutney is still liquid continue cooking until it has a thick consistency, stirring more often as it thickens.

Pot immediately into clean, sterilised glass jars. Jars without metal lids are safer as the vinegar in the chutney can react with the metal of the lid.

You can vary the flavour of chutney by adding more spice, crushed garlic, chilli peppers or cayenne pepper.

Why not send Housing News one of your own favourite recipes? The best one published will receive a gift voucher. Send your recipe to Jan Smith, Housing News, Ashford Weald Housing, Civic Centre, Ashford TN23 1PL.

Help on the way

Work has started on an innovative new project adjoining Ashford Weald's sheltered housing scheme at Farrow Court in South Ashford.

The project will see seven new bungalows built to provide short-term accommodation for people leaving hospital, helping them get back on their feet before returning to their own homes.

The bungalows can also be used on occasions to prevent people who need extra care for a short time having to go into hospital.

The 'recuperative care' project is a partnership development between Ashford Borough Council, Kent County Council Social Services, the Primary Care Trust and Age Concern. The aim is to speed up discharges from hospital into a safe environment in which people can be given support and care prior to going home.

The facility should be up and running by April 2004.



KCC's Peter Lake, Marion Dinwoodie from Ashford Primary Care Trust and borough councillor Allen Wells cut the turf.

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Showered with praise

Ashford Weald continues to keep a close eye on the feedback received from our customers – the tenants who live in our homes

Since the last edition of Housing News, a total of 30 people have taken the trouble to write to the housing team with a compliment or a complaint. While we prefer the compliments, we take the complaints seriously as it helps to show us where we could be doing things better.

One letter we were particularly pleased to receive came from Jan and Gary Chittenden, who wrote from their home in Orchard Field, Bethersden, after the council installed a flush-floor

shower to help Mrs. Chittenden.

Gary wrote: "Many thanks for the flush floor shower that has been installed. It has given Jan some independence back. This has helped us a lot.

"We are very lucky to have a council that cares about its tenants. Once again a very big thank you, we are both extremely grateful."

If you want to say "thank you" or tackle us on an issue you think we could have handled better, then get in touch. Write to us at Ashford Weald, Civic Centre, Tannery Lane, Ashford, Kent TN23 1PL

Home safety competition results

Housing News readers proved to be a switched-on bunch when they tackled the 'Hunt the Hazard' competition in the June issue.

There were a number of very good entries for the competition, which asked readers to spot a number of safety hazards in a drawing of the sort of kitchen you really wouldn't want to live in!

The winners were:

1st prize Mr Brian Woodham of Barn Platt

2nd prize Ms Eileen Gosbee of Bockhanger Lane

3rd prize Mrs Isobel Turvey of Royds Road.

They were each awarded a seven-day pass for the Stour Centre. Runners-up received energy-saving light bulbs to help them save money and energy.

The answers (and things to avoid in *your* kitchen) were:

- 1 – saucepan handles protruding over the edge of the stove
- 2 – over-filled chip pan which could boil over
- 3 – curtains blowing near cooker
- 4 – kettle and toaster flexes trailing off worktops
- 5 – too many plugs and adaptors in socket
- 6 – ironing board in the middle of the room
- 7 – iron left on and standing on its heel on the ironing board
- 8 – iron flex trailing
- 9 – shirt hanging from ironing board
- 10 – dog food left on the floor
- 11 – toys left on the floor
- 12 – bucket of water unattended on the floor
- 13 – knives left lying around
- 14 – over-full waste bin, with sharp-edged tins protruding
- 15 – bleaches and cleaners in unlocked, low-level cupboard
- 16 – drawer left open
- 17 – skewers and polish hanging out of drawer
- 18 – child in baby bouncer on worktop



The poster was reproduced by permission of safety charity RoSPA. For more information visit www.rospa.com

And the good news? The first aid cupboard on the wall.

Messy Business



Dirty dogs – and their owners – have come under fire from Ashford Borough Tenants' Forum.

The forum has once again raised the age-old problem of dogs' mess on pavements and in open spaces and is calling for pet owners everywhere to have more consideration for others.

Excrement left on the streets is messy, smelly, unhygienic and unpleasant – and illegal in much of Ashford. There are by-laws which require owners to clear up after their pets in the majority of open spaces – and a dog warden whose job it is to enforce the law.

Rather than prosecute people, though, the borough council would rather dog owners' acted responsibly, cleared up after their pets and used the red dog litter bins provided across Ashford to dispose of their 'poop scoop' bags.

Thank you

A big 'thank you' from Ashford Weald to all those tenants who took part in this year's Housing Status Survey, designed to find out what tenants think of the housing service we provide.

A total of 1800 people were sent survey forms, and a huge number of people took the time and trouble to fill them in and send them back. The results will be available later this year and will be published in a future "Housing News."

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Clicking with our tenants

The appeal in the last edition of Housing News for tenants' photographs which could be considered for printing in the 2004 Ashford Weald calendar brought a deluge of super snaps from all over the borough.

Editor Jan Smith has been delighted with the response so far, but is still keen to receive more pictures from keen cameramen and women across Ashford.

Here is just a sample of the many pictures that have been submitted so far. Think you can do better? Then send your finest photographs to Jan Smith, Ashford Weald Housing, Civic Centre, Tannery Lane, Ashford.



Alongside the photographs, Jan was also sent two old postcards which could well awaken old memories amongst some of our more elderly tenants.

The first shows the old bandstand in Victoria Park, described on the front of the postcard as the 'Recreation Ground'. St. Mary's Parish Church can just be seen in the background on the left of the picture.

The second postcard is of Great Chart, and shows a windmill to the left of the view, together with a horse and cart in the centre. The postcard has been used and bears a green halfpenny stamp.

Do you have any interesting old views of old Ashford? We would be delighted to include them in a future edition of Housing News – make sure we have your full address so that they can be returned.



If you require Housing News in a different language or format, or on cassette tape, contact Jan Smith on 01233 330488.

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