

Welcome to the winter edition of the Midlothian Tenants Forum newsletter. The newsletter is produced by the Midlothian Tenants Forum, the Council wide tenant group representing Council tenants on housing issues throughout Midlothian. If you want to find out more about housing issues in Midlothian then read on!

Update on housing issues in Midlothian

New Council houses

The first of 1000 new Council homes were occupied by tenants in Bill Russell Grove, Dalkeith in May 2007. Over 200 new homes are now under construction at Poltonhall, Newtongrange and Mayfield. Further new Council homes will soon start in Poltonhall, Mayfield and Gorebridge.

One of the new houses at Bill Russell Grove



Inspection of housing services

The Council's housing department is currently preparing for inspection by Communities Scotland, the executive agency responsible for the regulation and inspection of social rented housing. The inspection will assess how well the Council delivers housing and homelessness services. The sort of things the inspectors will be looking at include how the Council allocates Council houses, maintains and repairs its houses and consults with tenants.

Local Housing Strategy

The Council is currently reviewing its Local Housing Strategy for years 2007 – 2017. The strategy sets out the approach for increasing the supply and improving the condition of affordable housing in Midlothian. It also assesses the demand for different types of housing.

New Tenant Participation Strategy

Midlothian Council places a high priority on working together with tenants to ensure their voices are heard and acted on. The Council is currently in the process of reviewing its Tenant Participation Strategy. The strategy sets out how the Council will provide information to tenants and involve them in decisions that influence housing services.

The revised strategy has been developed in consultation with the Midlothian Tenants Forum at a specific strategy review event. The Council would like to receive comments from other tenants so it can produce the final document. A tear-off slip has been included at the back of this newsletter so you can provide your comments. There is a FREEPOST address so you will not require a stamp when posting.

The Tenant Forum's recent activities

It has been a very busy year for the Tenant's Forum. This year saw the Forum organise the second annual tenant conference. The conference was a great success with interesting presentations from housing staff and a choice of workshops on the Council's mediation service and tenant participation strategy. The closing session of the conference consisted of an open debate between local election candidates from each of the main political parties, which resulted in a lively debate about housing and related issues in Midlothian. We were also very lucky to have the former Minister for Communities, Rhona Brankin MSP address the conference and outline the (previous) Executive's commitments to housing and social inclusion.

The Forum has recently received some good news about funding of their activities. Earlier this year the group put together an application for grant funding from 'Communities Scotland'. The grant is intended to fund the Forum's project for promoting its activities and promoting the profile of tenant participation in Midlothian. To date the Forum has been successful in its initial bid for funding and will now work with 'Communities Scotland' on the exact details of the proposed project. The Forum hope to start their promotional activities in the new year, which will consist of purchasing exhibition equipment, publishing printed information and developing it's own professionally designed website. Watch this space.



A Midlothian Tenants Forum Meeting

As described at the start of the newsletter, the Tenant Forum has also been involved recently in reviewing the tenant participation strategy. The Forum would like to emphasise how important it is to get all tenants views so the Council can provide a more tenant-focussed service in the future. The FREEPOST questionnaire enclosed will allow you to have your say.

Who should join the Tenants' Forum?

All Midlothian Council tenants can join the Tenants Forum. Membership is free and you can come along to our monthly meetings which take place at Bonnyrigg Public Halls or receive a copy of our minutes in the post.

The Tenants Forum is a Council-wide tenant organisation, which is registered with Midlothian Council. The Council consults with the Forum when it is reviewing housing policies or making changes to services. The Council's housing department keeps the Forum up to date with housing issues and asks for feedback from the Forum on how well it is providing its housing service.

How to comment, complement or complain
If you have a specific comment or complaint about your own Council house you should report it to your housing officer or telephone the Council on 0131 663 7211. The Forum cannot represent tenants with individual issues, although by representing tenants as a whole we can ensure tenants' voices are heard.

Annual General Meeting of the Midlothian Tenants Forum

The Midlothian Tenants Forum is holding its AGM on Saturday the 17th November. The meeting will take place at the Dalkeith Arts Centre. All Midlothian Council tenants are encouraged to come along and find out how to get involved in YOUR Tenant Forum.

The annual general meeting is the Tenant Forum's main event of the year. The purpose of the event is to select committee members and office bearers for the next year. You do not have to be involved with the Tenants Forum to attend. Simply turn up on the day and we will make you feel welcome

Digital television switchover

As you may be aware from television campaigns, the UK is switching to digital TV between 2008 and 2012. This means that all your TV equipment may have to be upgraded to receive digital signals.

Midlothian Council is in touch with The Scottish Government and UK Digital to ensure that the switchover happens as smoothly as possible. The Council will keep tenants up to date about how you may be affected through future Council and Tenant newsletters.

New Allocation Policy

The council has recently approved a new allocations policy which will be introduced by April 2008. The new policy will be based on points awarded to take account of applicants' housing needs. In future there will be two main waiting lists for housing. A Transfer List will be in place for Midlothian Council tenants who wish to move to another property. There will be a Direct List for applicants who are not Midlothian Council Tenants. The allocation process will be 'transfer led' which will free up more vacant properties for letting.

In order for the council to make the transition from one system to another, it is necessary to review each application and re-assess them under the new points system so that applications can be appropriately placed on the new waiting lists. To enable this to take place all current applicants will be issued with a new application form for completion and return. It is essential that this form is returned as soon as possible so that the re-assessment can be carried out. A booklet explaining the new policy will also be included.

The new application form has been designed in partnership with Melville and Castle Rock Edinvar Housing Associations so that in future housing applicants need only submit one application. The information will be shared between the three housing providers. Information received through this review will also be shared with the Housing Associations where appropriate.

Spotlight on a Forum Committee Member – Elaine Sneddon!

In each edition of the Midlothian Tenants' Newsletter we thought we will introduce a new member of the Tenants' Forum so you know we aren't just another faceless committee!

Q. Why did you get involved with the Midlothian Tenants Forum?

I first got involved in the Forum when I was at college and had to do a study of the Housing Act (Scotland). I attended the first conference and found it to be really interesting and so I agreed to become a committee member of Midlothian's Tenant Forum. Due to work commitments I can't always attend the meetings but I try and get along as often as I can. I had a hand in designing our logo and I always get a wee buzz when I see it on the newsletters.

Q. What other interests do you have outside of the Forum?

I am currently an undergraduate at Edinburgh University. I'm in my second year of the Community Education Degree. My days are pretty hectic!

Most mornings I set off by bus into town, this gives me a chance to read more of my course work. I attend classes then spend some time in the Moray House Library. Any spare minute has to be spent reading! You wouldn't believe the amount of reading that is involved...

I work in the evenings as a Youth Worker. This gives me a chance to get involved with the young people in Midlothian. The young people I meet are great ambassadors for Midlothian. Too often we read about the negative side of youth, I'm lucky to be involved with youngsters who are representative of Midlothian's youth – positive, motivated and actively involved in their villages.

The team of Youth Workers I work with plan a program of activities. All our activities are organised around what the young people want to do. We do arts & crafts, play football or basketball, board games; or just sit and talk if that's what the club members want.

To relax I enjoy walking or cycling. I also enjoy live music and luckily for me there are a number of live music sessions going on in Midlothian, held in various pubs in Newtongrange, Lasswade, Loanhead and Auchendinny.

All in all, I'm glad I live in Midlothian – it has a lot to offer!

How well do you know your housing service



In July, the Midlothian Tenants Forum put their heads together to come up with a list of housing related questions to pose to the Council. Many of the questions were inspired by the recent house building in Midlothian. Others were simply things the Forum felt Council tenants might like to know more about.

Q. What was the Council's housing debt prior to borrowing for the new house building programme?

A. The debt before the new build programme (at 31st March, 2005) was £1.8million

Q. What is the current housing debt?

A. The debt at 31st March 2007 after completion of 28 new houses and pre-construction work was £8.7million

Q. What amount of money from the sale of Council houses went towards paying off housing debt?

A. Income from Council house sales (approximately £5m) is used to finance the building of new houses therefore reducing the amount the Council has to borrow.

Q. Why does a tenant living in a Council house built before the 2nd World War pay higher rent than a tenant living in a house built in the late 60s?

A. The rent structure was changed in 2004 when a points system was introduced based on size and type of property

Q. Does the Government provide any money towards the cost of building new houses in Midlothian?

A. There is no grant to the Council for house building.

Q. How much does it cost to house homeless people in bed & breakfast?

A. The average B&B rate is £35 per person per night

Q. What is the process for buying back ex-Council houses – are they bought back at market value?

A. In order to try and address the rising demand from applicants who are homeless and to assist in reducing the cost of B&B accommodation, the Council is buying former Council or housing association properties on a 'spend to save' basis.

This process is based on the cost of the house being met by savings on B&B spending over a period of time, during which the houses will be used as temporary accommodation for homeless families. At the end of the timescale the purchased properties will be included in the Council's permanent housing stock.

Q. Where does the money come from to buy back houses?

A. The costs are met through Housing Revenue Account Capital Plan which is funded through the sale of Council houses, income from Council house rents and borrowing.