

The future of Ashford Borough Tenants Forum – a move towards a panel.

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Background.

The Regulator Framework for Social Housing was published in March 2012 after a consultation period, to fall in line with the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) taking over the regulation of social housing. The thinking behind the framework is to support the HCA's approach that is based strongly on the principle of co-regulation: it will have a statutory duty to minimise interference, it will focus on 'economic regulation (regulation to ensure the Registered Providers (RPs) are well run, financial viable and exhibits value for money (VFM)), there will be clear expectation that landlord should be accountable to tenants for the quality of their service.

The Framework describes the following:

Involvement and empowerment

Registered providers shall ensure that tenants are given a wide range of opportunities to influence and be involved in: **the scrutiny of their landlord's performance and the making of recommendations to their landlord about how performance might be improved**

Registered providers shall support their tenants to develop and implement opportunities for involvement and empowerment, including by:

- **supporting the formation and activities of tenant panels or equivalent groups and responding in a constructive and timely manner to them**
- **the provision of timely and relevant performance information to support effective scrutiny by tenants of their landlord's performance in a form which registered providers seek to agree with their tenants. Such provision must include the publication of an annual report which should include information on repair and maintenance budgets, and**
- **providing support to tenants to build their capacity to be more effectively involved.**

What is a tenant panel and how can it work for Ashford?

There is no one definition of tenant panels but the thinking behind them is that tenant and landlords work together in decision-making, monitoring and scrutiny, complaints, service review and policy considerations.

We asked the existing members of the Ashford Borough Tenants Forum (ABTF) to review their "role" within the authority, how they felt they were perceived, training needs and moving forward. This exercise allowed us (the officers) to map the training gaps as well as understand how the ABTF felt their role had developed over the last few years. It was clear that they felt the Forum was no longer reaching its potential and perhaps seen as no longer an influential body. During the review period members of the forum (and officers) attended a champion event at Amicus Horizon regarding the establishment of tenant panels – this planted the concept for consideration. In July ABTF established a working group to look at how Ashford could

benefit from a tenants panel and the transition required from dissolving the existing Forum to the launch of a Tenants Panel in April 2013. Members of the working group attended a tenant's event at Trafford Hall (The National Tenants Resource Centre) which gave them an insight into the potential benefits that scrutiny and tenants panels can achieve for both tenants and landlords.

How will a tenant's panel work for Ashford?

The panel members (to be recruited) will co-ordinate performance and feedback from

- Ashford Borough Council
- Provide support for the annual tenants report
- Provide general feedback (from the variety of sub-groups)
- Set the goals (achievements) for each year
- Influence housing policy
- Decide on the areas to scrutinise

What has been achieved to date.

The working group has met on six occasions formally but also carried out individual research on the many different models of panels, the working group agree that it is pivotal for panel members to understand how the business works in order to be able to challenge policies in an informed way. The onus will be on officers to ensure information is accessible and easy to understand. The group has worked on the panel's aims, aspirations, publicity, training and the recruitment process along with the development of a draft Constitution and Code of Conduct.

The aims and aspirations for the panel are:

Aims:

1. realistic
2. aim for geographical cover
3. make the Ashford Back Chat smarter
4. Interview process to bring out the best in people.
5. The established groups to remain (but will be reviewed where appropriate to ensure their effectiveness.) – Its proposed for them to feed into the panel specific points over the year.

Aspirations:

1. Challenge and improve services by having two scrutinies per year
2. Influence all housing strategy and policies by having a formal process of information sharing between the Head of Service and representatives of the panel
3. Inform and engage with all tenants about the work the panel and its subgroups through the corporate website, housing news etc

The working group along side officers have developed a promotional schedule along with a training programme for early 2013. The promotional schedule will include the use of the Housing News as well as four individual events facilitated at four of our

sheltered housing schemes covering both urban and rural areas in January and February 2013. In addition to this every member of the Ashford Back Chat (our database of involved tenants and leaseholders) who have expressed an interest in tenants panels will be contacted to invite them to apply for a position on the tenants panel, the interviews will be held in March and will be undertaken by the Senior Area Manager the Housing Services Team Leader. The successful candidates will then be invited to a taster session and be advised of the training schedule.

The training that has been agreed initially by the working group will include Assertiveness and Meeting Skills, Diversity Training, Scrutiny Taster Session, Anti-social Behaviour, Basic Law Training and Housing Management – An Ashford Prospective. Further training will be decided by the new members.

Moving forward to April 2013.

The next few months will be a challenging but rewarding time as the final transition from Ashford Borough Tenants Forum to a Tenant Panel takes place, senior managers, officers and members of the working group feel that this process will allow tenants and leaseholders to work towards achieving their key principles of co-regulation and scrutiny, tenant leadership, access for all, functioning structures and adequate support and landlord commitment.

Recommendations

That the Committee agree to dissolve the Tenants Forum in favour of a Tenants Panel and approve the terms of reference appended to this report as Appendix 2.

Supporting documents:

Ashford Borough Tenants Forum Constitution August 2008.

Tenants Panel Constitution

Tenants Panel Code of Conduct

Copy of Housing News Winter Edition (please refer to pages 10-11)

ASHFORD BOROUGH TENANTS FORUM CONSTITUTION

NAME

- The name of the organisation is the Ashford Borough Tenants Forum (hereafter known as ABTF) but may be changed by a resolution to change this constitution passed at the AGM.

RESPONSIBILITIES AND EXPECTATIONS OF ABTF MEMBERS

- Attend training / information events
- Attend meetings on a regular basis. Attend at least 8 out of the 12 monthly meetings unless prevented by illness or other reasons beyond the member's control, when apologies for absence should be tendered.
- Receive / attend specific training on officer posts (chair, secretary, treasurer etc)
- Produce an annual plan for the ABTF to go in the Tenants Newsletter for all tenants to see /validate / amend.
- Expect to receive information and support from ABC.
- Participation and teamwork in full by all members eg involvement in issues debated

AIMS OF THE ABTF

- Work alongside and on an equal basis with Ashford Borough Council, to implement, develop and review the **Tenant Participation Compact**.
- Work with Ashford Housing Services to produce, implement, and then monitor local Area Plans.
- Improve services and estate environments within the Borough of Ashford.
- Represent the views of all tenants, licensees and leaseholders of Ashford Borough Council. Provide regular information to them, and consult on matters which effect them. Work with Ashford Borough Council in the development of housing and related services, in accordance with the principles of Best Value.
- Encourage greater tenant participation in housing services.
- Provide and promote training to Forum Members and other tenants licensees and leaseholders on areas of activity and concern.
- Be non-party political in carrying out all activities, and treat everyone as equals.
- Be involved in developing lettings policies.
- Have an action plan, eg to discuss various topics or areas, and an annual forecast of income and expenditure.
- Avoid the use of jargon
- Request and encourage attendance at ABTF meetings, of relevant Councillors.
- Carry out any activities related to the above aims, and obtain grants where appropriate.

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES

- The ABTF, in all conduct of its affairs, prohibits discrimination or harassment on grounds of race, gender, age, sexuality, disability and religion.

MEMBERSHIP

1. General

- The ABTF shall consist of up to 14 members. The first Members are listed on the attached sheet, and they hold office until the conclusion of the first AGM. Members of the ABTF may seek re-election in the first election and in all subsequent elections.
- All future terms of office commence at the conclusion of the AGM and run for the relevant number of years (or a little more or less depending on the date of the AGM) until the conclusion of the relevant AGM.
- A member's membership of the ABTF shall end before the end of their term of office on (a) resignation in writing to the chair, or (b) when the member ceases to be, or to live with a family member who is an Ashford Borough Council tenant leaseholder or licensee.
- In the event of up to three termination(s) of membership(s) during the year between Elections, the same number of person(s) who would qualify to stand as Candidates in an Election could be co-opted on to the ABTF. Such co-opted Member(s) shall serve only from the date that they sign the Register of members until the conclusion of the next AGM, and for the purpose of the following Election their place(s) shall be treated as open for nomination as if they had not been filled by co-option.
- There will be no membership fee or annual subscription charged to members of the ABTF, but all newly elected, co-opted, and deemed elected members shall sign the Register of Members maintained by the secretary, thereby agreeing to be bound by the provisions of this Constitution throughout their term of membership. The secretary shall enter the dates of commencement and termination of membership in the Register and shall keep it up to date.
- In the event of dispute or challenge as to whether any member or any family member of a member is or was at any time a tenant leaseholder or licensee of Ashford Borough Council, and the Chair or vice chair is unable to resolve the dispute on the evidence available, the member concerned shall provide any necessary Data Protection Act consent in order to enable the chair or vice chair to request Ashford Borough Council to write to ABTF confirming the position, and Ashford Borough Council's letter shall be conclusive.
- In the event of dispute as to the interpretation of this constitution or any Standing Order, the decision of the ABTF shall be final.

2. Candidacy and electoral procedure

- All tenants, licensees, and leaseholders living in Ashford Borough Council owned houses, flats, maisonettes, bungalows, sheltered accommodation, and leased properties, shall be eligible to stand for election for a place on the ABTF. This can include family members living with the tenant licensee or leaseholder. However all candidates must be over the age of 18.

- The secretary will make every effort to advertise widely within the Borough the date by which nominations should be received each year.
- Nomination is by self-nomination in writing to the secretary, at least 21 days before the last ABTF meeting before the AGM. The last ABTF meeting before the AGM must make arrangements for a ballot (where required by this Constitution) to be held in time for the results to be known before the AGM.
- On any ballot, all tenants, licensees, and leaseholders living in Ashford Borough Council owned houses, flats, maisonettes, bungalows, sheltered accommodation, and leased properties shall be sent voting papers and invited to vote by post. However each household shall only receive one ballot paper and have one vote.
- If Ashford Borough Council is carrying out the ballot, then the results of the ballot shall be written to the ABTF by the Council and the Council's letter shall be conclusive in the absence of manifest error.
- In the event of a tied ballot vote between two or more candidates the ABTF shall draw lots to decide which candidate(s) shall be entitled to the longer term of office.

3 The First Election

- At the first election to the ABTF a ballot shall be held in any event and the four candidates each with the highest number of votes shall serve a full three year term of office; the four candidates each with the next highest number of votes shall serve a two year term of office; and the four candidates each with the next highest number of votes shall serve a one year term of office. Any further candidates will not be elected.
- In the case of a deemed election (when a ballot is not held) the ABTF shall draw lots to determine which candidates shall serve for three years, then which candidates shall serve for two years, and any further candidates shall serve for one year.

4 All Subsequent Elections

In all years after the year of the First Election, nominations shall be invited as set out above for the places created by the retirement from office of Members at the AGM and by the resignation or termination of membership of other members during the year since the previous Election.

- A ballot shall be held if the number of nominations is more than the number of vacancies but not otherwise, in which case those nominated shall be deemed to have been elected.

OFFICER POSTS

- The ABTF shall have four officers (who must be members at all times) and the first officers are as listed on the attached sheet.
- The officers shall stand down at the conclusion of each AGM.
- Any member of the ABTF who has been a member for a minimum of one year within the last three years shall be entitled to stand for election to the posts of chair, vice chair, treasurer and secretary. The election shall take place by paper ballot of ABTF members as the last item of business at each AGM.
- One individual shall not hold more than one post at any one time.

- The officers shall report to each AGM on the work done by the ABTF since the last AGM.
- The ABTF shall produce Standing Orders which it may revise from time to time to govern the calling and conduct of ABTF Meetings, and the AGM.
- All officers must sign the Register of Officers and enter the dates of commencement and termination of office.

<p>Chair</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chair and adjourn meetings as required. • Guide the ABTF in working towards its goals • Ensure activities and decisions are reported back to tenants, licensees, and leaseholders • Liaise on behalf of the ABTF with other individuals and organisations • Be a public face for the ABTF • Represent the wishes of the ABTF • Co-ordinate the work of ABTF members. • Sign written record of meetings as a correct record. 	<p>Vice-chair</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deputise for the chair person • Assist the chair as required • Work with the chair to ensure that the ABTF runs smoothly 	<p>Treasurer</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chair the budget working group • Work with Tenant Participation Officer and Budget Group to agree annual expenditure • Present budget report to the AGM
<p>Secretary</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organise the meetings of the ABTF • Keep an up to date written record of all meetings • Deal with all correspondence on behalf of the ABTF. • Maintain the Register of Members and of Officers • Keep a record of Members meeting attendance. 	<p>All ABTF Members</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Represent tenants at ABTF meetings • Participate in decision making at ABTF meetings 	

MEETINGS

1. General Behaviour

- All attendees at meetings should show respect for the Chair. The meeting Chair should endeavour to ensure that there is an equal right for participants to speak at meetings, including tenants licensees and leaseholders who are not members of the ABTF.
- If a rowdy altercation arises during a meeting the member or members involved should be asked to leave the meeting at the discretion of the Chair. This should be respected and complied with. If the disagreement continues, the meeting should be suspended until the member or members involved leave, after which the meeting can be reconvened.
- When a meeting is held and the majority agree on the outcome and this is noted, this matter should be dropped unless new evidence arises.

2. ABTF Meetings

- These will be open to Ashford Borough tenants leaseholders and licensees to attend, unless the ABTF determined that this would not be appropriate for a particular meeting or item of business due to its confidential or other serious nature.

3. Annual General Meeting (AGM)

- The ABTF shall hold an AGM during each calendar year (not earlier than May) on a date to be set by the ABTF. This will be published by the end of January each year, and advertised in the next tenants newsletter. The secretary shall give all members of the ABTF at least 14 days written notice of the date. The notice shall include details of any proposed changes to the constitution, other resolutions and minutes of the last AGM.
- The ABTF shall make every effort to give the Community 14 days written notice of the AGM, and this will include an agenda including any resolutions, and minutes of the last AGM.
- Any proposed changes to the constitution or other resolutions must be notified to the secretary in writing at least 21 days before the AGM and must be signed by a proposer and seconder.
- At the AGM the ABTF shall:
 - Deliver an annual report to include a forecast of income and expenditure to those attending.
 - Present annual accounts to members and those attending
 - Arrange for an independent examination of accounts.
 - Consider any resolutions put forward by ABTF.
 - Vote on any amendments to the constitution.
 - Give an action plan including any scheduled events for the coming year to the Ashford Borough Tenants, Licensees and Leaseholders attending.

4. Additional Events

- Each year the ABTF may hold additional events to be agreed by the ABTF, which shall be open to the community.
- Reasonable effort will be made to give at least 7 days notice to the community of additional events.

5. Special General Meetings (SGM)

- An SGM may be called by the ABTF, and must be called within 28 days if requested in writing specifying the business to be discussed by at least 25 tenants, licensees, or leaseholders. The ABTF must make reasonable effort to advertise details of a SGM 7 days in advance of the meeting.

6. Voting

- Each ABTF member shall have one vote on any resolution put before any meeting and a simple majority of those who vote shall carry the vote except in relation to amendments to the constitution, when a 2/3 majority of those present will be required.
- All voting that takes place at an AGM, SGM, and ABTF meetings, shall be counted and recorded in the minutes, and shall bind all members.
- If there is a tie, the Chair will have an extra or casting vote.

- No vote shall be valid unless a Quorum of 6 or two thirds (rounded up) of the number of ABTF members, whichever is less, was present at the time of the vote, including at least two officers..

7. Minutes

- All formal meetings such as ABTF meetings, SGM's, and AGM's must be minuted and the minutes formally approved by the next meeting and signed by the chair.
- Minutes of AGM's, SGM's, and ABTF meetings shall be circulated to ABTF members and also be available to inspect from the secretary for all Ashford Borough Council tenants, licensees, and leaseholders, upon request in writing.

FINANCIAL MATTERS

- The ABTF shall prepare an annual forecast of income and expenditure, to be presented at the AGM.
- The Treasurer shall open a bank or building society account and or deposit account in the name of the ABTF and keep records of its income and expenditure. The treasurer shall report the balance in the account at each ABTF meeting. The treasurer would control all payments listed in the annual forecast of expenditure. Items not listed in the annual forecast must go back to the ABTF for permission to spend.
- The ABTF shall appoint three authorised signatories to include a non-officer member for any cheques and cheques shall be signed by at least two of the authorised signatories. The signatories must not be related to one another.
- The ABTF accounts shall be kept up to date and open to inspection by members at ABTF meetings. Annual accounts for each calendar year shall be independently examined and shall be presented to the AGM.
- The Treasurer is authorised to pay from petty cash travel and other expenses at a rate to be determined from time to time by the ABTF to members of the ABTF undertaking work for the ABTF providing that each payment is supported by a receipt, ticket or voucher. Each such payment of petty cash shall be signed by the receiver. The Treasurer shall provide a list of petty cash payments at each ABTF meeting.

INFORMATION

- The ABTF shall provide regular information to all tenants licensees, and leaseholders on matters affecting them. In addition to an approximately quarterly newsletter, AGM's and SGM's will be advertised as widely as possible in community locations.
- The Constitution and minutes of all AGM's, SGM's, and ABTF meetings shall be available for inspection from the secretary for all tenants, licensees, and leaseholders, at subsequent AGM's, SGM's, and ABTF meetings.

DISSOLUTION OF THE ABTF

- The ABTF can only be dissolved by a Special General Meeting, called specifically to consider a motion to dissolve the ABTF.

- All tenants, licensees, and leaseholders shall be given 14 days written notice of such a meeting, which shall contain the wording of the resolution.
- The ABTF shall only be dissolved if two-thirds of tenants, licensees, and leaseholders present at the Special General Meeting (including ABTF members) vote for the motion to dissolve the ABTF.
- If the motion is passed, funds and possessions shall be returned to Ashford Borough Council, except for funds and possessions raised by the ABTF from its own fundraising which shall be donated to either the Council or a charity operating in the Borough of Ashford, chosen by the SGM.

Updated 8.9.08

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TENANTS PANEL CONSTITUTION

1.0 Purpose of the Constitution

The purpose of the constitution is to set out how the Tenants Panel will operate, how its decisions will be made and to make sure that these decisions are representative, efficient and accountable.

2.0 Aims of the Tenants Panel

The aims of the Panel shall be to:

- To provide comments and direction on a range of issues relating to the Council's housing policies and the management and maintenance of its properties.
- To work, without prejudice, with the Council as landlord, for the benefit of all tenants and leaseholders
- To ensure that Ashford Borough Council is accountable and transparent to its tenants
- To embed the priorities of tenants in the organisations approach to performance management and service improvement resulting in better services
- To ensure that there is a customer focused commitment to service delivery
- To be a mechanism for providing feedback from tenants and leaseholders to officers, local councillors, central government, and other national agencies such as the Homes and Communities Agency
- To be non political and to abide by requirements of the Equalities Act
- To challenge, where appropriate, decisions made by Ashford Borough Council's customers homes and property department with the objective of improving the service.
- To increase the influence of the panel with officers and councillors
- To be a channel for the work of the subgroups.

3. Role of the Tenants Panel

To achieve its stated aims, it will be the role of the Tenants Panel to

- Represent and promote tenant opinion and ensure that this becomes central to the delivery of all housing services.

- Participate in the management of housing services for and on behalf of all tenants and leaseholders in the borough.
- Influence practices and policies that govern housing management in the borough.
- Ensure compliance with the regulatory framework including the agreement of and monitoring of local offers
- To act as a scrutiny mechanism and structure to enhance accountability and ensure compliance with regulatory requirements as a means of driving service improvements
- Maintain effective partnership working with officers who manage customers homes and property services, as well as the Housing and Customer Services Portfolio Holder, and communicate effectively and positively with elected members of the Council
- To receive and respond to reports and information submitted to it by Ashford Borough Council's Customers Homes and Property Service relating to service provision
- Contribute to the setting of performance targets and the monitoring of progress against these
- Consider and making recommendations on the findings of consultations carried out by Ashford Borough Council's Customers Homes and Property Service
- Coordinate the work of the sub groups which will have a more detailed involvement in specific housing issues. [see appendix A]
- Participate in training to promote greater understanding of housing and related matters
- To make all communication easy to understand
- To overview the operation of the complaints procedure to ensure that lessons are learnt from complaints where applicable
- Promote and encourage tenant involvement in the borough and network with other tenants groups as appropriate

4. Equal Opportunities

The Tenants Panel opposes any form of discrimination and will aim, at all times, to promote awareness of equal opportunity issues and good practice in tenant participation initiatives

The Tenants Panel will not discriminate on any grounds. This includes but is not restricted to all of the protected characteristics covered by the Equality Act 2010 (age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy or maternity, race, religion and belief, sex and sexual orientation) The Tenants Panel will ensure that there is full participation and equality of opportunity for all members in the operation of the Panel and its members will encourage involvement in the wider tenant population.

In its meetings and in the conduct of its business in general terms, the Tenants Panel will not tolerate any discriminatory remarks and the Chair has the discretion to ask any member of the Panel making such a comment to leave the meeting.

5. Membership

Membership of the Tenants Panel is open to any named council tenant or council leaseholder owning a property in the Ashford Borough, except in the circumstances stated below.

Where the Council has commenced legal proceedings for rent arrears or a serious breach of its tenancy conditions or if proceedings have been commenced or been taken against the tenant in question in the last two years.

Where the Council has started legal proceedings against a leaseholder for recovery of service charge or any other breach of their leasehold conditions. Existing Panel members will have their membership suspended if the Council issues legal proceedings against them for rent or rent service charge arrears or for any other breach of their tenancy or lease agreement.

All persons wishing to join the Tenants Panel must initially be referred to Ashford Borough Council's Customers Homes and Property Service to enable their eligibility to be confirmed.

Any tenant or leaseholder refused a position on the panel may appeal against this decision using the grievance procedure set out in the code of conduct.

Members of the Tenants Panel are not elected and therefore, represent tenant opinion as a whole. However, members of the Panel who have demonstrated a commitment to the work of the Panel through a period of membership of one year, will be encouraged to be a designated representative for a specific area

The role of the area representative will cover the following:

1. An initial familiarisation tour of the area to gain an overview of the type of properties and issues that exist
2. Receiving information about major planned maintenance or improvement works due to be carried out in the area

3. The opportunity to participate in estate inspections and any reality checks or other scrutiny activities carried out in the area

This role will be flexible with each representative able to choose the level of involvement that they have.

Although the names of the representatives for any area will be publicised no contact details will be given and anyone wishing to contact their representative will be directed via an email address which will be managed by the Council.

There is no requirement to live in the area that any Panel member chooses to represent. Areas may be 'shared' by invitation from the existing representative.

Where a new member of the Panel wishes to represent an area already covered by another Panel member, this issue will be resolved through mutual agreement in consultation with the Chair and / or Vice Chair of the Panel

It is a condition of membership that panellists at all times uphold the objectives of the Tenants Panel and conduct themselves in a reasonable manner when attending panel meetings, and not bring the name of the panel into disrepute.. Any panellist may be excluded for breach of this condition or for any other conduct contravening the objectives of the panel by a majority of those present and voting at any panel meeting. Any panellist so excluded will have the right of appeal to the next or subsequent meeting of the panel.

Membership is open to any tenant or leaseholder of Ashford Borough Council, regardless of race, colour, age, sex, religious or political beliefs, cultural background, disability or illness, gender, marital status, sexual orientation, class, appearance or employment status and subject only to the conditions set out above.

For logistical reasons, it has been agreed by the Panel that its membership shall not exceed 20 people. If more than 20 people seek membership of the Panel an appropriate solution will be sought in consultation with the Chair and Vice Chair.

Any member of the Panel that wishes to resign from the Panel should confirm this in writing to the Tenant Participation Officer who will notify the Chair accordingly.

6. Attendance

Members of the Tenants Panel are required to attend a minimum of three meetings each year as well as at least one of the training events held in any year.

Anyone who fails to meet this minimum attendance criterion will be deemed to have resigned from the Panel subject to the discretion of the Chair in respect of any special circumstances.

Members of the Tenants Panel who form part of its themed sub groups are required to attend at least half of the relevant sub group meetings in each year. Where this requirement is not met, the Panel's representative will be deemed to have resigned from this sub group and a replacement representative will be appointed.

Any member of the Panel who is unable to meet the minimum attendance criteria for reasons of ill health will have their entitlement to membership reviewed by the Chair and Vice Chair

Members of the Tenants Panel must send their apologies in advance for their non attendance to either the Chair or Vice Chair of the Panel or the Council's Tenant Participation Officer.

Meetings

The Tenants Panel will normally meet every two months at the Council Offices in Ashford. Additional special meetings may be called, if appropriate. The venue and time of the meetings may be altered in consultation with the Chair or Vice Chair to encourage the involvement of tenants. All meetings will be held in venues where there is access for any tenant who has special needs.

The Tenant Participation Officer will be responsible for distributing an agenda at least seven working days prior to any Tenants Panel meeting, together with any supporting documentation.

Items for inclusion on the agenda will either have been agreed at the preceding meeting or through discussion between the Tenant Participation Officer and the Chair of the Panel. Any items for inclusion on the agenda should be submitted to the Tenant Participation Officer or Chair at least fifteen working days before the meeting. Minor items can be raised as 'Any Other Business' at the appropriate point during the meeting by either Panel members or officers.

All panel members should read any papers sent to them in advance of a meeting and ensure that they come properly prepared for the meeting, with all relevant papers that have been sent to them.

Sufficient time will be allocated for each agenda item and a timescale agreed for responses to queries that cannot be answered at the meeting

A Customers Homes and Properties Services representative will be responsible for taking the minutes of the Tenants Panel meetings. These will be circulated to all panellists within ten working days of the meeting and published on the Tenants Panel page of Housing Services web pages.

Chairing arrangements

Members of the Tenants Panel will be asked to elect a Chair and Vice Chair each April to preside over the operation of the Panel and the business of each meeting.

Nominations for the position of Chair and Vice Chair will need to be proposed and seconded by existing members of the Panel, having first sought the Panel member's agreement.

Anyone being nominated to the position of Chair or Vice Chair must have been a member of the Panel for a period of 2 years immediately prior to their nomination.

If the number of nominations for each or either position is greater than one then a ballot shall be held at the April meeting administered by the Tenant Participation Officer.

All nominated candidates are expected to attend the April meeting and any candidate that does not attend will be deemed to have withdrawn their nomination, unless there are exceptional circumstances.

Only those present at this meeting of the Panel will be eligible to vote, in accordance with the voting arrangements for the Panel generally.

Once in post, the role of the Chair will be to:

- Agree the agenda for each meeting
- Uphold, represent and promote the purpose of the Tenants Panel and its constitution and code of conduct and to interpret these where necessary.
- Introduce Tenants Panel meetings
- Introduce agenda items and make sure that decisions are made, where appropriate
- Make sure that everyone has the chance to contribute to the discussion
- Decide whether to hold an informal meeting if a quorum is not present.
- Maintain control of the meeting and make sure that it runs in accordance with the agenda and the Code of Conduct
- Close the meeting

In the absence of the Chair, the Vice Chair will be responsible for running the meeting. Should neither the Chair nor Vice Chair be present, those members attending will select a Chair for the purposes of that meeting only

Quorum

This is the least number of members of the Tenants Panel that need to attend a meeting to make all the proceedings at that meeting valid. Meetings of the Tenants Panel will only be deemed to be quorate if at least 8 panellists are present.

If a quorum is not present within thirty minutes of the time appointed for holding the meeting then the Chair will be responsible for deciding whether an informal meeting should still take place. This decision will be based upon a consideration of the issues due to be discussed and the opinions of those present.

Voting

Members of the Tenants Panel should aim to make decisions by consensus. Where a vote is necessary, every Panel member present shall have one vote and every decision shall be made by a majority of votes.

A resolution that is put to the vote of the meeting will be decided upon a show of hands unless a ballot is demanded by either the meetings Chairperson or at least 5 members of the Tenants Panel who are present and entitled to vote.

Unless a ballot is demanded, a declaration by the Chairperson of the result of the show of hands shall be proof of that fact.

Where the number of votes cast in any matter is equal, then the Chair shall have a casting vote in addition to his / her vote.

The result of any vote will be fully recorded in the minutes of the meeting.

Themed sub groups [Appendix A]

The Panel may delegate to any member or group of members the authority to act as its representative on any themed sub groups that may be established from time to time. Each sub group will agree its own terms of reference immediately after its establishment.

Members of the Panel appointed to these sub groups will be required to provide periodic verbal progress reports to meetings of the full Panel.

Copies of the minutes of any sub group meetings will be provided to the Chair and Vice Chair of the Panel for information purposes

Induction

All newly appointed panel members will be required to attend an induction session which will cover the functions of the panel and its subgroups, an overview of the work of the Customers Homes and Property department, and be an opportunity to ask questions.

Training

Members of the Tenants Panel recognise and accept the importance of training for the overall development of the group and agree to attend at least the minimum required number of training events.

Training needs will be subject to an assessment every other year and a programme to meet the needs identified will be drawn up by a Housing Services representative and agreed with the Chair and Vice Chair of the Panel

Additional training will also be arranged, as required, for those members of the Panel appointed to its themed sub groups.

In addition to the above, training will be delivered once every three years in relation to equality and diversity issues and working together as a team.

Council Support

The Council will provide reasonable financial, administrative and practical assistance to support the meetings of the Tenants Panel and the training and development of its members. The Council will publicise, promote and provide opportunities for members of the Tenants Panel to obtain relevant training.

A representative from Housing Services will attend all meetings of the Tenants Panel and its sub groups in order to service the requirements of the panel. The attendance of other Council officers and elected Members will be at the request of the Tenants Panel, subject to availability, or for the purpose of presenting or discussing agenda items. Refreshments appropriate to the type and duration of any meeting of the Panel will be provided.

Allowances

Expenses incurred in connection with attendance at Tenants Panel meeting and any associated events will be reimbursed based on the published rates and on the production of appropriate receipts. Transport will be arranged for those wishing to attend meetings who do not have access to other means of transport.

Communication

The housing management team will promote the existence of the Tenants Panel and regular information about the Panel will be included in the Housing News, at local events and via the Council's website and other forms of social media.

All social media shall be subject to safeguards and will be monitored by a responsible person who will identify any inappropriate use and take necessary action as set out in the code of conduct.

Annual Evaluation

The Tenant Participation Officer shall survey Panel members each year to assess their satisfaction with the operation of the Panel and to identify any areas for improvement. The findings of these surveys will be discussed with the Chair and Vice Chair and any action required agreed.

Restrictions

Panellists acknowledge that their membership of the Tenants Panel does not grant them any additional rights other than as tenants or leaseholders of Ashford Borough Council and they should not use their position for any personal or perceived gain or benefit.

Individual tenancy matters or other individual problems are outside of the constitution of the Tenants Panel and should be raised in accordance with accepted procedures.

Any conflicts of interest must be declared prior to discussion.

Review and Amendments to the Constitution

This constitution shall be reviewed by the Council and the Chair and Vice Chair automatically once every three years or on the request of the Chair or the Council. Any proposed changes must subsequently be approved by a majority of those present and voting at a panel meeting

Suspension of the Panel

In the event of any meeting of the Tenants Panel breaching this agreed constitution and code of conduct, the Council reserves the right to temporarily suspend the operation of the Panel.

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Dissolution of the Panel

The Panel may recommend its dissolution to the Council after consultation with Panel members and in order to make way for a new tenant involvement structure.

DRAFT

CODE OF CONDUCT

FOR MEMBERS OF THE TENANTS PANEL

The purpose of this code is to explain how members of the Tenants Panel are expected to carry out their role. Members are required to follow this Code of Conduct not only in panel meetings but also in any other situations where they are representing this group. It is each panellist's responsibility to make sure that what they do complies with the requirements of this code. This Code of Conduct should be read in conjunction with the Tenants Panel Constitution.

General

Panel members must:

- Promote equality by not discriminating unlawfully against any person
- Treat others with respect
- Not do anything which compromises or is likely to compromise the impartiality of the Council
- Work for the benefit of all tenants, setting aside personal interests.
- Ensure that, at all times they are acting in their capacity as a member of the Tenants Panel, their behaviour is fair and reasonable and in accordance with the Panel's constitution and code of conduct.
- Not, in their capacity as a Panel member, conduct him or herself in a manner which could be regarded as bringing his or her Panel membership or the Panel generally into disrepute
- Not, in their capacity as a Panel member, use this membership to gain or seek to gain undue favour, influence or benefit
- Not to make inappropriate use of social media sites, to go through the responsible person who will monitor sites and identify any misuse.

Confidentiality

The business of the Tenants Panel may involve dealing with issues, which are controversial, sensitive or confidential in nature. Members of the panel must therefore, exercise discretion and care in performing their duties. Any confidential information that is presented to or discussed by the panel must not be disclosed to anyone apart from members of the group in order to allow the business of the meeting to take place.

Members of the Tenants Panel should never disclose or use information they have received by virtue of their membership of the Tenants Panel for their own personal advantage or that of anyone known to them or to the disadvantage or discredit of the Council or anyone else.

Panellists should also respect all individual tenants' confidentiality and should refrain from mentioning specific matters, which may cause embarrassment or the identification of any individual. Prior consent should be obtained from any tenant if it is necessary to make a personal reference to them at any meeting.

Personal information volunteered during the course of any meetings or training sessions must remain confidential

Members of the Panel shall ensure that all paperwork provided to them in connection with this membership should be kept in a secure place and either returned to the Council or destroyed following resignation from the Panel.

Audio or visual recordings of Panel meetings are prohibited

Any confidential information that is presented to or discussed by the Tenants Panel or any of its associated sub groups must not be disclosed to anyone apart from members of the group in order to allow the business of the meeting to take place. In the event of any disagreement relating to this matter, the issue will be referred back to the Panel.

Conduct of meetings

Members should at all times observe the following accepted practice while taking part in a panel meeting:

- All meetings will be arranged to be accessible for all
- Read all papers sent to them in advance of the meeting and arrive properly prepared for the meeting
- All comments should be addressed via the Chair
- Allow each other the opportunity to speak and comment without interruption
- Each person to speak only once on an issue until every other member has had the opportunity to speak unless the Chair gives permission otherwise
- To be courteous to each other and to support and assist other members in seeking the best possible solution to the problems being discussed.
- To respect the right of all tenants and officers attending panel meetings to speak and comment on the issues being discussed
- Aim to keep to the subject under discussion
- All members must be prepared to be wrong
- Not to level criticism or comment of a personal nature at individual tenants, officers or elected members
- To follow the guidance of the Chair in the conduct of the meeting

- Members must remember to follow the agenda of the meeting and to help each other to reach effective decisions
- To remember that the panel exists to benefit tenants generally and not specific individuals and that officers serve the interests of all tenants
- To bear in mind the rights of individual residents and the rights and duties of staff when proposing solutions to problems
- Not to use offensive, racist or abusive language
- Not to speak or write on behalf of the group without the prior agreement of the group. Any correspondence sent on behalf of the group should be made available to all members of the group
- To operate within the agreed constitution and code of conduct
- Address staff in a professional manner. Personal attacks and abusive comments will not be tolerated
- Decisions of the Panel should be upheld and supported by members of the Panel outside of meetings
- No smoking is permitted within the boundaries of Council premises
- Any tenant suspected to be under the influence of alcohol or non prescription drugs may be excluded from the meeting
- Late arrivals should enter quietly without disrupting the business of the meeting
- Mobile phones should be switched off or onto silent at all times during meetings of the Panel or any of its themed sub groups.

Discrimination

No member of the Tenants Panel will discriminate on any ground against any other member of the group or other person attending the meeting.

Discriminatory, racist, abusive or inflammatory language will not be tolerated in discussions and the Chair has the discretion to ask any member using such language to leave the meeting.

All those who attend meetings have the right to be treated with dignity and respect, regardless of age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage or civil partnership, pregnancy or maternity, race, religion or belief, sex or sexual orientation or any other matter which causes people to be treated with injustice.

Constitution

All members of the Tenants Panel should familiarise themselves with the agreed constitution to make sure that they continue to meet the aims and objectives of the group.

All potential new members of the Panel will be asked to sign a declaration confirming their agreement to comply with the constitution and code of conduct.

Conflicts of interest

Individual members:

- Should disclose any interest, whether personal, family or on behalf of any group they represent, that they consider may affect or influence their approach to the matter under discussion
- Must not expect to receive more or less favourable treatment by the Council as a landlord or its officers because of their membership of this group
- Should avoid placing themselves in a position which could lead other tenants to think that they receiving preferential treatment or benefit
- Must use the established Council procedures for reporting repairs or pursuing any other matters relating to their own property or on behalf of another individual resident
- Should never seek to use their position to seek preferential treatment or undue influence for friends, relatives or any firm or body with which they are personally connected.
- Should consider whether any personal or professional connection they may have is inconsistent with their membership of the panel.

Breach of Code of Conduct

If a member of the Tenants Panel does not abide by this code of conduct or uphold the constitution or is asked to leave a meeting of the Panel, their membership will be reviewed by a convened group comprising 3 members of the Tenants Panel and up to two council officers. The representatives of the Panel shall be the Chair and Vice Chair and one other member.

If it is decided that the code of conduct has been breached or the constitution not upheld, the following may apply:

- First breach – verbal warning held on file for 3 years
- Second breach – written warning held on file for 3 years
- Third breach or gross misconduct – membership of the panel withdrawn for a minimum of 3 years.

The Chair also has the right to stop any meeting of the Panel in circumstances where the Constitution and /or code of conduct is not being complied with.

Grievance procedure

If any member of the Panel feels that they have been treated unfairly they have the right to appeal. This appeal will be heard by representatives from the Council's Housing Service. The decision of the appeal panel shall be final.

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Appendix A

Tenant Panel Subgroups

Scrutiny Panel

Repairs Monitoring Group

Anti-social Behaviour Subgroup

Young Tenants Forum

Complaints Panel

Sheltered Forum

New Build Subgroup

Leaseholders Forum

Estate Inspection Subgroup

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WINTER 2012/13

Housing NEWS

TENANTS' & LEASEHOLDERS' NEWSLETTER
FROM ASHFORD BOROUGH COUNCIL

Tenants' panel
coming soon see
page 10 for details



Oakleigh's hero

Inside:

- Meet the team
- Swapathon
- Tenants' panel



ASHFORD
BOROUGH COUNCIL

Ashford
best placed in Britain

Council contacts

Housing services team

www.ashford.gov.uk/housing
Tel: 01233 330688
Email: housing@ashford.gov.uk
Repairs hotline: 01233 330366

The Ashford Gateway Plus

www.kent.gov.uk
Church Road, Ashford, Kent, TN23 1AS
Open: 9am – 4pm Monday to Friday
to see a customer service advisor
Tel: 08458 247247
Typetalk: 08458 247905

The Tenterden Gateway Centre

2 Manor Row, High Street, Tenterden, Kent, TN30 6HP
Tel: 0845 8247202
Typetalk: 08458 247905

Civic Centre

www.ashford.gov.uk
Tannery Lane, Ashford, Kent, TN23 1PL
Call centre
Tel: 01233 331111
Typetalk: 01233 330744
Lines open:
8.30am – 4pm Monday to Friday
24 hour Payment Line: 01233 330625
Benefit Fraud Line: 0800 026245

Ashford Borough tenants' panel steering group

Email: abctfg@yahoo.co.uk
Telephone Stella Cowland:
01233 334206

Housing News

Editor: Philippa Dale
Telephone: 01233 330365
Email: philippa.dale@ashford.gov.uk

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www.ashford.gov.uk



On Facebook:
on.fb.me/AshfordBC



On Twitter:
@AshfordCouncil

Unsung hero



If you live in South Ashford you may recognise the gent on our front cover as the local litter picker. What you probably don't know is that Lionel Butler does this job every week on a completely voluntary basis.

Lisa Mason, the scheme manager for Oakleigh House where Lionel lives, suggested we feature Lionel in Housing News and we jumped at the chance to celebrate this unsung hero.

I caught up with Lionel on one of his 'days off', and asked him:

What made you decide to start litter picking?

"I got tired of looking out of the window at all the rubbish. I used to be a bin man and just thought I would get out there."

Do you have regular days when you go out?

"I usually go on a Monday, but it does depend on the weather – it is no fun in the rain. If it's raining I just go on a different day."

How far do you go on your travels?

"I have a regular route along the main roads through the housing estates and I do the grass areas and the parking areas."

What type of things do you find to pick up?

"Throw away lighters are the most common. Lots of cans – soft drinks and so on – I fill the recycling bin most weeks."

It would obviously be better if there was no litter for you to pick up. Is there anything you would like to tell people about dropping litter?

"I wonder why people throw litter out of cars, and stuff crisp packets in hedges."

Lionel only agreed to have his photo taken if his neighbours did too. They are all clearly proud of Lionel who can be out for up to five hours doing this service for his local community.

Do you know someone like Lionel who gives up their time for their neighbours? It may be by doing a bit of gardening, or some shopping, or anything which helps. Let me know and if there is any interest shown I will think about starting a good neighbour competition. At the moment, Lionel is winning hands down!

Philippa Dale 01233 330365
philippa.dale@ashford.gov.uk

You said we did

We use the 'you said we did' logo when we feedback on something you have asked for and we have been able to deliver.



Contents

- 4 Welfare reform
- 6 Meet the team
- 9 Watercress rubbish
- 10 Tenants' panel
- 12 Estate inspections

Cover picture: Lionel with his neighbours



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Coming soon...

If you are a regular visitor to Ashford Borough Council's website, you'll soon notice that it has a fresh look and an easier way to access information.

www.ashford.gov.uk is the place to:

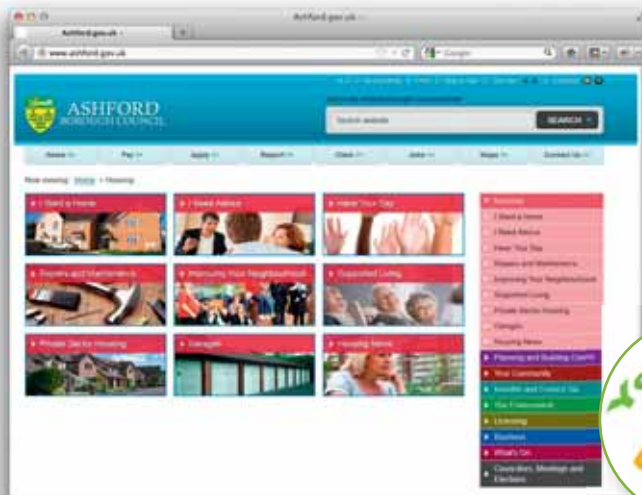
- Look up your rent account
- Report a repair
- Complete forms such as housing benefit forms

Many customers contact the council's call centre or visit the Gateway, when the

answers to their questions are available on the council's website.

The council is trying to direct as many people as possible to its website, as it is a more cost-effective and quicker way to resolve your queries. Why wait in a queue at the Gateway or on the telephone, when you can find out yourself online?

Look out for more information on the new look www.ashford.gov.uk in our next issue!



Youngsters hanging around drinking?

Do you see lots of alcohol-related litter?

Trading Standards is responsible for making sure that age restricted items, particularly alcohol and cigarettes, are not sold to anyone underage. It is a criminal offence to sell these products to a young person under 18. Underage drinking can lead to health problems, truancy and anti-social behaviour.

There are a number of ways that young people obtain alcohol, from home, attempting to buy it themselves or asking an adult to buy it for them. If an underage person asks you to buy alcohol for them, don't be tempted. This is called a proxy sale and you could get an £80 on-the-spot fine or face prosecution with a fine up to £5,000.

We are also interested to know about anyone selling cheap cigarettes - it is possible that they are fake. All cigarettes are harmful but counterfeit products have been found to contain cyanide, plastic, sand and even rat droppings. Fakes are so dangerous that doctors have warned that they are responsible for four times as many deaths as drugs.

If you know of retailers that you suspect are selling cigarettes or alcohol to children, or if you have been asked by a young person to buy alcohol for them, please let us know.

Visit www.kent.gov.uk and type 'report underage sales' into the search box to complete an online form.

Your contact can be completely confidential and you do not need to give your name or address.

Christmas and New Year opening times for Ashford Gateway and the Civic Centre

Date	Ashford Gateway Plus	Customer service advisors, housing call centre, meet and greet, Civic Centre
Saturday 22nd December	Normal operating hours	Closed
Monday 24th December	Open until 1pm	Closed
Tuesday 25th December	Closed	Closed
Wednesday 26th December	Closed	Closed
Thursday 27th December	Normal operating hours	Normal operating hours
Friday 28th December	Normal operating hours	Normal operating hours
Saturday 29th December	Normal operating hours	Closed
Monday 31st December	Open until 4pm	Open until 4pm
Tuesday 1st January	Closed	Closed
Wednesday 2nd January	Normal operating hours	Normal operating hours

Welfare reform update

**Do you claim housing benefit?
Do you have a spare bedroom?
Are you under 61½ in April 2013?**

If you have answered yes to all three of these questions you need to read on!

From April 2013 a size criteria will be introduced for council and housing association tenants. This will mean there will be a limit to the amount of housing benefit paid depending on the size of your property.

Do you have a spare bedroom?

Under the new housing benefit rules there will be restrictions on the size of accommodation for which you can receive housing benefit. These rules will be based on the number of people in your household.

The new rules allow a bedroom for:

- Every adult couple (married or unmarried)
- Any other adult aged 16 or over
- Any two children of the same sex aged under 16
- Any two children aged under 10
- Any other child, (other than a foster child or child whose main home is elsewhere)
- A carer (or team of carers) who does not live with you but provides you or your partner with overnight care

There are NO additional bedrooms allowed for:

- Children or adults with disabilities
- Foster children
- Parents who have access (housing benefit will be paid to the parent in receipt of child benefit)

For more information please visit:

www.ashford.gov.uk/welfarebenefits

www.ashford.gov.uk/bedroomtaxcalculator

What should I do if I think this will affect me?

We are identifying households which may be affected by these changes in April 2013 - we may have already written to you. Initially we will be visiting and offering advice to everyone under pensionable age and in receipt of benefits, who we believe to be under occupying by two or more bedrooms.

These residents are facing a 25% reduction in assistance.

However DON'T wait for us! If you are worried about these changes you can do any of the following:

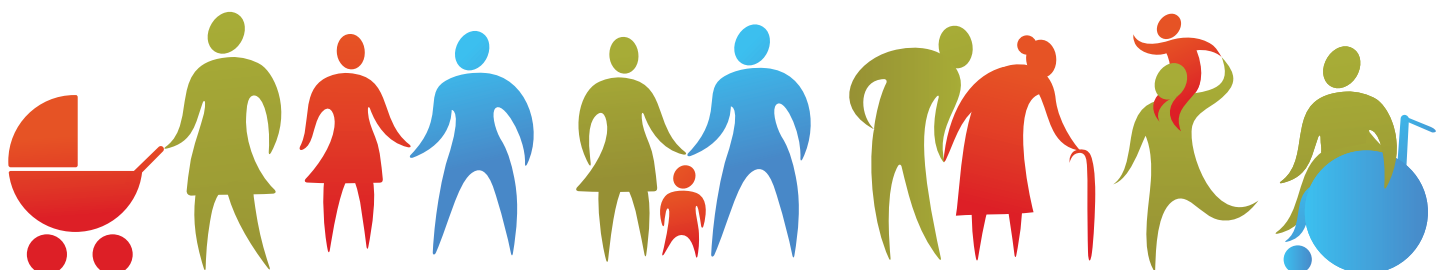
Down-sizing, either by doing a mutual exchange via Kent Home Choice (mutual exchanges) www.kenthomechoice.org.uk/mx/ or Homewapper www.homewapper.co.uk or applying for a transfer to a smaller property under Choice Based Lettings

Consider whether you can afford to stay in your property – We can offer a financial statement to help you decide if this will work for you.

Come and see one of our housing options officers for a referral into employment advice services.

Consider letting out the spare bedrooms in your home. For further advice contact Vicky Hammond on 01233 330415 or email vicky.hammond@ashford.gov.uk

Ashford Borough Council holds a job club at Ashford Gateway Plus on Tuesdays 1.30pm – 3.30pm which can help you to prepare for the work market.



Council tax support

Thank you to everyone who responded to the council's consultation on council tax support.

We received some very constructive feedback and are analysing all the responses received. We will keep you fully informed on our website at www.ashford.gov.uk/counciltaxsupport and through articles in the local press, Ashford Voice and here in Housing News.

The council consulted on a preferred option. It states:

- Pensioners will not be affected by the changes and will continue to receive similar support
- If you are eligible to receive disability allowances from 1st April 2013 when the local council tax support system begins, you would receive 95% of the support you do now
- The new local scheme will still aim to protect vulnerable groups and will encourage people to return to work
- Neither the council nor parish councils will directly fund the new council tax support scheme, in order to preserve other council services which residents have told us they want us to continue to provide

What could this mean for you?

It is anticipated that those people of working age who currently receive council tax benefit will see a reduction in their support.

www.ashford.gov.uk/counciltaxsupport

Independent advice

There are a number of free, independent advice services:

Citizens Advice Bureau
www.adviceguide.org.uk
 Tel: 01233 626185

Welfare Advice Service
www.welfareadvice.co.uk
 enquiries@welfareadvice.co.uk
 Tel: 08453450310
 1pm – 5pm Mondays to Fridays

Shelter
http://england.shelter.org.uk/get_advice
 Tel: 08088004444

Money Advice Service
www.moneyadviceservice.org.uk



Have a safe and happy Christmas

Kent Fire and Rescue Service (KFRS) is urging residents to stay safe this Christmas and ensure that the festive season doesn't end in tragedy.

Head of Community Safety Stuart Skilton said: "In all the excitement of Christmas it's easy to overlook potential fire hazards in the home. Many of the things we enjoy during this festive period, such as the fairy lights, candles, wrapping paper and decorations can all be fire hazards when proper care is not taken.

"Christmas can be a distracting time too, with a greater risk of leaving cooking unattended, and with many enjoying a Christmas tippie (or two), so make sure this doesn't lead to disaster."

Follow these festive safety tips to keep your family and home safer from the increased risk of fire:

- Ensure you have a working smoke alarm installed on all levels of your home. Test your smoke alarms weekly and never remove batteries to power presents!
- Never leave cooking unattended - stand by your pan - and avoid cooking after drinking. The majority of fires start in the kitchen.
- Never leave candles unattended. Keep decorations, cards and wrapping paper away from candles, fires, lights and heaters.
- Ensure you switch off fairy lights and unplug them before you go to bed, or leave the house. Check your Christmas tree lights conform to the British Standard (BS EN 60598).

- Always use an RCD (residual current device) on outdoor electrical equipment (a safety device that can save lives by instantly switching off the power if there is a fault).
- Don't overload sockets – ensure there's only one plug per socket and always turn off plugs when they are not in use.
- Make sure cigarettes are extinguished properly and never smoke in bed.
- Keep matches and lighters out of the reach of children.
- Plan and practice your fire escape route making sure your family and visitors staying for the festive period know what to do in an emergency.
- Check on older relatives and neighbours this Christmas, as they are at greater risk from fire.
- And finally, in the event of fire: get out, stay out and call 999.

Kent Fire and Rescue Service offers free fire safety advice. If needed, its community safety team can arrange a free home safety visit, which takes about 30 minutes and includes, if needed, the fitting of free smoke alarms.



For further information contact KFRS on 0800 923 7000 or visit www.3breaths.info.

Please note: All our staff carry identification to prove they work for Kent Fire and Rescue Service and will be more than happy to wait at the door if any resident feels they need to check they are genuine employees.

Meet the team

For most of their work the area managers have geographical 'patches'. This means as a council tenant or leaseholder you have a dedicated officer who you can talk to about any housing-related matter and who will contact you if there is an issue with your tenancy.

The patches



Anthony Crossley

Aldington
Bilsington
Brabourne
Great Chart
Hamstreet
Kennardington
Kingsnorth
Little Chart
Mersham
Ruckinge
Sevington
Shadoxhurst
Smeeth
Warehorne
Woodchurch
Newtown *Ashford*
Willesborough *Ashford*

anthony.crossley@ashford.gov.uk
01233 330464



Kay Devereaux

Brook
Challock
Charing
Charing Heath
Chilham
Crundale
Egerton
Godmersham
Hastingsliagh
Molash
Old Wives Lees
Pluckley
Shottenden
Smarden
Ashford Town
Henwood *Ashford*

kay.devereaux@ashford.gov.uk
01233 330373



Danny Regan

Appledore
Bethersden
Biddenden
High Halden
Newenden
Rolvenden
St Michaels
Stone
Tenterden
Wittersham

danny.regan@ashford.gov.uk
01233 330372

Tracy Bratton **Jean Cumbers**



Stanhope area managers
stanhopecustomer@moat.co.uk
01233 647396



Danny Regan covers Tenterden and the villages to the west of the borough. Ashford is divided between the other officers, as are the surrounding villages.

The exceptions to this are if you live in a bungalow which is not in a sheltered scheme, your area manager is Paul Hills, and if you live in sheltered accommodation you have a scheme manager or you can speak to the senior area manager for sheltered services, Kat Aylward.

The team is managed by operations manager Rebecca Wilcox, assisted by senior area manager Barry Moss.



Claire Wood

Hothfield
Musgrove Ashford
Watercress Ashford

claire.wood@ashford.gov.uk
01233 330379



Paul Hills

All bungalows apart from those in sheltered schemes

paul.hills@ashford.gov.uk
01233 330688



Vikki Perry

Wye
Willesborough Ashford

vikki.perry@ashford.gov.uk
01233 330894

I spoke to Vikki Perry on her first day as trainee area manager...

Welcome to the estates team, Vikki, can you tell us what you think the main challenges of this role will be?

"Initially, learning a new job and all that entails."

You are moving over from the customer contact centre. What skills will you be bringing from your old job?

"I bring a customer focus, and a wealth of knowledge about all the council's services. I think it will be particularly helpful to have an in-depth understanding of the benefit system."

Tell us what you are most looking forward to about your move to the estates team.

"Getting out into the community and meeting residents."

Philippa Dale



Sam Diggins

Brookfield Ashford
Eastmead Ashford
Hampden Ashford

sam.diggins@ashford.gov.uk
01233 330374



Ollie Samways

Boughton Aluph
Eastwell
Kennington Ashford

oliver.samways@ashford.gov.uk
01233 330375

Olympic legacy

Over the past four years Active Ashford has been working with individuals and groups in the borough to provide various ways of becoming fit and healthy. Schemes such as free swimming lessons, health walks, football coaching, and leadership courses have made a huge impact on the 15,000 people who have attended the schemes. The schemes attract boys, girls, men, women, people with disabilities and from a wide range of backgrounds, but all have something in common, they all wanted to build self esteem, meet other people and have fun.

If you are interested in Active Ashford programmes please visit the website www.activeashford.co.uk or email Simon Harris on simon.harris@ashford.gov.uk or telephone 01233 330232 for further information.



Feedback:

Community orchard for Watercress Fields

Following consultation, the site of the new orchard has been agreed. It will be planted in area B as shown on this map.

As part of the community engagement on the new orchard planned for Watercress Fields, the Kentish Stour Countryside Partnership organised a trip for Year 4 from nearby Ashford Oaks Primary school to No Man's Orchard, a community owned and managed orchard near Chartham Hatch. The idea was to show the children an old and increasingly rare traditional orchard, as this is the type of orchard that will be being planted in their local park.



Heating energy saving tips

- Turn your central heating thermostat down – a reduction of only 1°C can save up to £50 a year. In addition, turning the radiators down in rooms which you do not use as often will avoid heating the whole house unnecessarily
 - Time your central heating to switch off half an hour before you leave the house: radiators continue to provide heat for some time after turning off
 - The recommended temperature for hot water cylinder thermostats is 55°C – check that yours is running efficiently
 - Consider shortening the time that you have your heating on, for example, reducing usage by 30 minutes each day
- For more money saving tips visit www.moneysavingexpert.com**



Estate improvements

Communal areas getting a 'Harley Street' face lift.

Blocks of flats in Kennington, High Halden, Tenterden and Stone have recently received internal redecorations.

We have worked closely with tenants in choosing paint and floor options and were extremely happy with the results as are our tenants – Danielle from Bybrook says "It's looking really nice".

Don't take our word for it have a look at the before and after picture below.



Before



After



I would like to highlight the growing issues with litter around Watercress House. We recently removed an external bin because it was attracting rats and other vermin and asked that the bin chutes are used by everyone instead.

Unfortunately, this has caused issues, including items being thrown out of the landing window and bin bags and bulk rubbish being placed in the garage area. We are committed to improving our estates, and aren't afraid of getting our hands dirty. So myself and other area managers went through bin bags that

had been left in undesignated areas to gain evidence of who has been placing them there.

We are working with the Street Scene and Open Spaces Team to limit the impact this will have on residents and tenants in the area who have pride in where they live. Notice and fines can be issued under the Environmental Protection Act 1990.

And to the tenants and residents in the area who are already helping us to achieve this, thank you, your help is really appreciated!

Claire Wood

News from Tenterden

Would you like to see more of me? Of course I know the answer to that is yes, but we are reviewing our presence out in the rural areas I manage. I currently run a well attended drop in session at Tenterden Gateway on the first Wednesday of every month from 9am - 11am and need to know if you would like us to run similar sessions on a more regular basis.

There are exciting times ahead for us in and around Tenterden. We have the opening of the new youth café, 'Next Generation' early 2013, and through some partnership work with Affinity Sutton and SureStart we are looking to brighten up Priory Way with a large bright plant bed, run a sports day within the community, and install a brand new fixed table tennis table also in Priory Way.

If you would like to be involved with either of these projects please contact me on 01233 330372 or via email danny.regan@ashford.gov.uk

Finally can I take this opportunity to wish you all a very Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.

Danny Regan

Nicky Dodds Affinity Sutton and Joanna Vos Community Support Officer



The tenants' panel is coming!



The Ashford Borough Tenants' Forum is being replaced by a tenants' panel which will be launched at a meeting on 10 April 2013 at 6.30pm in the council chamber at the Civic Centre, Tannery Lane, Ashford.

We want to make sure the panel is made up of tenants and leaseholders who really want to make a difference, who want to challenge us, and work with us to improve the housing service.

Tenants and leaseholders have been completing the Ashford Back Chat form on the back of Housing News, registering their interest in the panel but there is still room for more.

What do we want from you?

- A desire to make things better
- An interest in your community
- A wish to improve the housing service
- Be willing to give up a few hours of your time each month

What can you expect in return?

- Training
- Travelling and childcare expenses
- The satisfaction of knowing you are helping to improve things for your neighbours and community

Subgroups

One of the principle roles of the panel will be to coordinate and monitor the subgroups, each of which will concentrate on a particular aspect of the housing service.

It may be that you wish to be involved in a subgroup but not be a panel member. Which subgroups are you particularly interested in?

- Scrutiny - to improve particular aspects of the housing service
- Estate inspection - to monitor this aspect of the work of the estates team

- Repairs monitoring - to influence the performance of the main contractors
- Antisocial behaviour subgroup - to have a say about ASB policy and practice
- Complaints panel - to act in a peer capacity to help resolve complaints
- Sheltered forum - to represent the sheltered schemes and help agree policy concerning the sheltered service
- New build subgroup - to assist with the consultation process and be involved in the procurement of contractors and monitoring their performance
- Leaseholders forum - be a leaseholder and influence policy in connection with leaseholder issues
- Young tenants' forum - be a tenant under 26 years of age be willing to bring the young tenant perspective to all housing policy

The recruitment program

We want to make sure we catch everyone who might be interested, so in addition to sending all tenants and leaseholders an application form on the back of Housing News, we will be coming out to some of our sheltered schemes in January and February to answer questions and catch anyone we may have missed. (See the swapathon timetable on page 13 for details).

Everyone who volunteers will be contacted and invited to attend an interview. This will be a bit like a job interview but hopefully more friendly, and to help we are telling you the questions we will be asking and even the sort of responses we are looking for from potential panel members.

Questions	What we're looking for
Please give an example of your enthusiasm and commitment to resident involvement	A desire to make a difference
How would you demonstrate respect for residents staff and councillors?	Be willing to listen to the other point of view
Explain what you understand by the term 'customer care and quality'	Offering a high standard of service
What is your current understanding of the word equality?	Being treated equally regardless of what factors people might have which are different
A requirement of being a panel member will be discussing issues. What, in your view, are the basics you need in order to achieve this?	Be willing to listen to their point of view and to be honest and ask for clarification if something does not make sense to you
Please give an example of where you have worked as part of a team to achieve a positive outcome	Coordinating friend and family activities
Please describe what you would be able to offer to the panel	Be willing to work with other residents staff and councillors to achieve positive outcomes
What do you think the panel is there to do?	Influencing the formulation and review of housing policy



Training

We want the panel to hit the ground running so we have devised a training program which we hope will help this to happen. These courses are free and we will offer travel and childcare expenses. Although the courses are aimed at potential tenant panel members who will be given priority, the training will be offered to tenants from housing associations and some housing staff, so hopefully there will be lots of sharing of ideas.

Training timetable

When	What	Where	Who
5 March 2013 9.30am - 4.30pm	Assertiveness and meeting skills – ‘making your meetings more effective and feel confident to get involved and have your say’	Willow Centre Halstow Way	Any tenant or leaseholder
7 March 2013 9.30am - 11.30am	Online diversity training	Ashford Gateway plus	Potential panel members
11 March 2013 10am-12noon	Scrutiny taster session	Committee room two Civic Centre	Potential panel members
11 March 2013 2pm - 4pm	Scrutiny taster session	Ashford Gateway Plus	Potential panel members
12 March 2013 10am-2pm	Social media training – ‘find out how social media works and how to get the best from it to promote your group and link to other residents’	Singleton Environment Centre	Any tenant or leaseholder
19 March 2013 10am-2pm	Anti-social behaviour training – ‘explore how you can tackle low level anti-social behaviour locally by working together and making links with the right agencies’	Singleton Environment Centre	Any tenant or leaseholder
21 March 2013 10am-2pm	Basic housing law training	Willow Centre Halstow Way	Potential panel members
26 March 2013 10am-12noon	How do we do it in Ashford - what is housing management?	Committee room two Civic Centre	Potential panel members
9 April 2013 10am-4pm	Panel induction day	The council chamber, Civic Centre	Panel members

To book a place or to find out more information please contact Philippa Dale on 01233 330365 or email philippa.dale@ashford.gov.uk



The tenants' panel needs a logo

Former Ashford Borough Tenants' Forum member Julie O'Kane-Gill has had a go at designing a logo – can you do better?

Send or email your ideas to Philippa Dale
philippa.dale@ashford.gov.uk



Estate inspections

You are very welcome to attend estate inspections in your area. If there is not one due in the next four months check in the calendar or with your area manager (see pages 6 and 7). They can also confirm start times and meeting points.

Date of inspection	Area Manager	Area Covered
Monday 7 January	Ollie Samways	Ebony, Stone, Appledore, Kennardington and Warehorne
Monday 14 January	Kay Devereaux	Hillbrow and Clockhouse
Monday 21 January	Claire Wood	Bybrook and Beecholme
Monday 28 January	Anthony Crossley	Newenden, Rolvenden, and Wittersham
Monday 4 February	Danny Degan	Woolreeds
Monday 11 February	Sam Diggins	Godfrey Walk
Monday 18 February	Vikki Perry	Shadoxhurst, Kingsnorth and Great Chart
Monday 25 February	Ollie Samways	Brookfield west
Monday 4 March	Kay Devereaux	Brookfield north
Monday 11 March	Claire Wood	Hothfield
Monday 18 March	Anthony Crossley	Brookfield east
Monday 25 March	Danny Regan	Rothbrook, Gotley Mere, and Towers View
Tuesday 2 April	Sam Diggins	Charing and Charing Heath
Monday 8 April	Vikki Perry	Newtown Green
Monday 15 April	Ollie Samways	Twelve Acres
Monday 22 April	Kay Devereaux	Old Wives Lees, Chilham, Godmersham, Crundale, Hastingleigh, and Brook
Monday 29 April	Claire Wood	Poets Corner and Repton Manor

Stanhope estate inspections

All inspections are due to start at 10am but please contact the Stanhope Centre on 01233 647396 or email stanhopecustomer@moat.co.uk to check.

Estate inspection roads and dates:

Badlesmere Close	8 January, 5 February, 5 March, and 9 April
Bredgar Close	10 January, 7 February, 7 March, and 11 April
Brenchley Close	17 January, 14 February, 14 March, and 18 April
Crundale Close	16 January, 13 February, 13 March, and 17 April
Eastry Close	9 January, 6 February, 6 March, and 10 April
Frittenden Close	17 January, 14 February, 14 March, and 18 April
Kilndown Close	8 January, 5 February, 5 March, and 9 April
Leaveland Close	10 January, 7 February, 7 March, and 11 April
Luddenham Close	11 January, 8 February, 8 March, and 12 April
Lynsted Close	16 January, 13 February, 13 March, and 17 April
Newenden Close	11 January, 8 February, 8 March, and 12 April
Otterden Close	15 January, 12 February, 12 March, 16 April
Sheldwich Close	9 January, 6 February, 6 March, and 10 April
Speldhurst Close	15 January, 12 February, 12 March, 16 April

New pictorial guide

The eagle eyed amongst you will notice that the 'tenants choice' inspections have been removed from the program. They have not disappeared but are going to be carried out by tenants who have received training and are called 'borough inspectors'. They will be carrying out quarterly inspections of the poorer areas in order to monitor the estate inspection process.

They will be using the new pictorial guide which shows images of good and poor standards which can be used as a measure to check estates 'on the ground'.

This will also free up area managers who will be doing an extra four estate inspections per year.



Localism Act UPDATE!

New housing tenancy strategy - fixed term tenancies

The way Ashford Borough Council awards new tenancy agreements for social housing is changing.

The cabinet has adopted a new social housing tenancy strategy, which will enable the authority to assess tenants' needs regularly and free up properties for those in greatest need.

The strategy, in accordance with Localism Act 2011, will introduce five year fixed term tenancies for new tenants from 1 October 2012, instead of the existing lifetime agreement.

This means that the council will be able to review each household's needs after five years, to see if their tenancy should be renewed or if the household should instead seek private sector housing.

Existing tenants will not be affected, and lifetime tenancies will still be available for vulnerable and elderly tenants.

Portfolio holder for housing Cllr Aline Hicks said: "A tenancy for life offers no incentive for tenants to move on from social housing, and it can mean that houses are not free for those in greater need.

"While some people may not be in a

position to leave after five years, the circumstances of others may have changed and they may be able to move into the private sector – either rented, shared ownership, or owner occupied.

"By changing the tenancy agreements, which will only affect new ones after 1 October 2012, we will be able to make the best use of existing properties and ensure that homes are not under occupied, and thus use them for those who need it most.

"The five-year fixed tenancies will enable people whose circumstances have change to move into more appropriate accommodation."

The council conducted a six week consultation on the strategy with registered social housing providers, parish councils, Citizens Advice Bureau and Shelter.

Kirsty Stewart from Bybrook Road, one of the first fixed term tenants, acknowledged that they will help the council manage their stock to better meet residents needs. Kirsty said "I think flexible tenancies will be a good idea."

Swapathon!

Lettings officers Donna Michael and Ellen Black are coming out and about in January and February to talk to tenants through how to do a mutual exchange.

They will be in the communal lounges at the following sheltered schemes, so if this is something you have been thinking about but haven't got round to investigating, why not pop along to one of our drop-ins and have a chat? We will also be offering welfare benefit advice and recruiting for the new tenants panel, as well as offering a cup of tea and a biscuit!



Drop-ins

- 17 January 2pm-4pm Luckley House Little Chequers Wye
- 29 January 10am-12noon Monypenny Matham Lane Rolvenden
- 19 February 10am-12noon Gerlach House Beecholme Drive Kennington
- 28 February 2pm-4pm Summer Leeze Twelve Acres Willesborough

or email housing@ashford.gov.uk

Prioritising your housing need

Changes to the way that applicants for social housing in Ashford are assessed have been approved by Ashford Borough Council's cabinet members.

The changes, which will come into effect in April 2013, mean that in addition to applicants being assessed in terms of their circumstances and priority need, the length of time that they have been waiting will also be taken into account to a much greater extent.

The plans will also see several councils across the county adopting very similar criteria to simplify the process for those people applying to more than one local authority. The process of bidding on the Kent Homechoice website will remain the same.

Currently, applicants are awarded 'points' for a variety of different reasons, such as certain medical conditions and over-crowding. The applicants with the highest points will have the best chances of re-housing regardless of how long they have been registered.

Under the new system all applicants will be placed within one of five bands based on their priority need, with Band A being for those with an urgent need for social housing, through to Band E, where those having a very low priority will be placed. However, within each band the application date will determine where each application is placed.



Your waste and recycling service is changing

Ashford has fallen behind the rest of the country when it comes to being green – and we know that you want the borough to catch up.

Our residents have told us that they want more opportunities to recycle, and for the process to be easier.

We have listened and next year, Ashford Borough Council is introducing a new and improved waste and recycling service across the borough that will save money, protect the environment and keep our borough beautiful.

From April 2013, there will be:

- A NEW weekly food waste collection,
- Fortnightly recycling collections, INCLUDING plastics, cardboard and Tetra Pak cartons, as well as the usual tins, cans, glass, paper, aerosols, foil and textiles
- Fortnightly non-recyclable household waste collections

Depending on their property, residents will be given new containers for their waste and recycling that will make it easier to store their waste hygienically and to move it out for collection.

So what will be collected?

Early next year, we will send residents full details of what containers you will

receive, and what to put out for collection.

Food Waste - Weekly

Raw and cooked meat and fish, all dairy products, fruit and veg, bread and pulses, tea and coffee, rice, pasta, leftovers, oils, butter, fats.

Recycling - Fortnightly

Cardboard, paper, magazines, plastic bottles, plastic food containers, yoghurt pots, Tetra Pak food and drink cartons, food tins, drink cans, foil, glass, aerosols, textiles.

Household Waste - Fortnightly

Cling film, polystyrene, crisp packets, sanitary products, nappies, cat litter.

Why is our service changing?

Ashford currently has one of the lowest recycling performance rates in the country at just 14 per cent. While we convert all our waste into energy, and do not send anything to landfill, we still have a duty to up our game and make recycling easier for everyone, and get the maximum value from our waste.

This is why we are proceeding with a new joint waste and street cleansing contract, in conjunction with Maidstone and Swale Borough Council, using the preferred contractor Biffa Municipal Ltd.

This means we will be working with one of the best recycling contractors in the country – Biffa works with three local authorities in the top five recyclers in the UK 2011/12.

The new 10-year, £86m contract will bring Ashford's recycling performance up to at least 37 per cent by 2014/15, and will save the council (and taxpayers) more than £500,000 a year.

Nine out of the 10 English councils with the best recycling rates in the country use the same system that we are introducing, and we will work closely with residents to ensure that it works for them.

The temporary Ashford household waste recycling centre is now open on the Cobbs Wood Industrial Estate, while the main site is closed for redevelopment.

This temporary site is located at the far end of Brunswick Road, Cobbs Wood Industrial Estate, Ashford TN23 1EL.

Opening times remain as Monday to Saturday, 8am to 4.30pm, Sunday and Bank Holidays 9am to 4pm.

For full operating details, please visit the website:

www.kent.gov.uk/ashfordhwrc

News for leaseholders

In September a group of leaseholders met with housing staff to talk about issues affecting them.

The main areas which came out of the meeting were:-

- Concern about whether the general repairs contractors are providing a good service and are considerate of residents.
- Concern about the distribution of costs for damage where there is lack of proof about who caused the damage.
- The perception that leaseholders receive a lower level of service than tenants

We will work with leaseholders to try to address these concerns where we can, but to provide clear and honest information where financial and other constraints where we are unable to offer solutions.

Leaseholders' corner

NEWS ... NEWS ... NEWS ... NEWS ... NEWS ... NEWS



Healthy communities

TCV from the Singleton Environment Centre are going to be running some practical gardening training sessions over the coming months – probably at the Ray Allen Centre, Stanhope Road. Attendees will be rewarded with a free ‘garden kit’ For more information and to register for a training place contact Philippa Dale on 01233 330365 or email philippa.dale@ashford.gov.uk.



Summer word search winner Mandy (and Harley) receives £20 of shopping vouchers

Sheltered housing remodelling update

Over the next few years the council is aiming to completely remodel Farrow Court. Plans are being drawn at the moment to double the size of the sheltered scheme and to create a modern scheme to offer excellent facilities for older people. Consultation with the resident of Farrow Court has started, with proposed plans and a DVD demonstration shown to existing residents of Farrow Court who will be involved in each stage of the proposed development and who will be the first group to move in to the new apartments. The proposals include a mixture of spacious 1 and 2 bedroom apartments with balconies, energy efficiency measures, inviting modern communal spaces, and attractive.

Hang 10 Garden Project

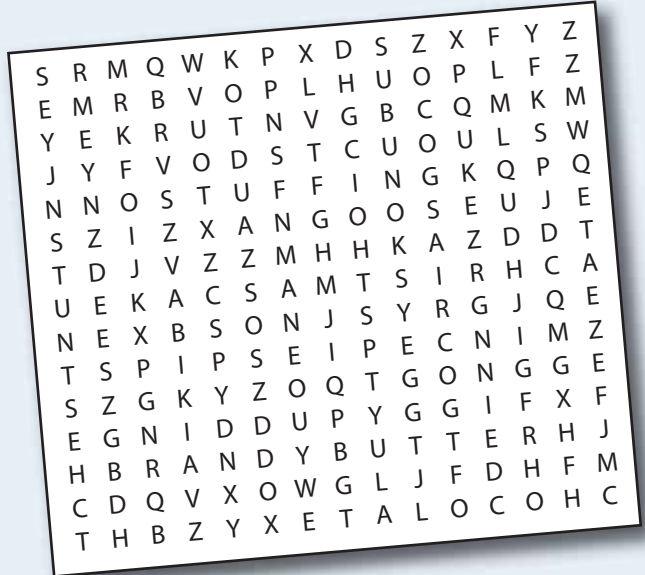
Ashford Borough Council is pleased to announce an exciting pilot garden project in partnership with Hang 10!

If you live in a block of flats in the urban area of Ashford and have a communal garden you will soon see the Hang 10 team out and about maintaining these areas – we would also like you to consider getting involved in the spring with new planting schemes. Keep an eye out for the team, posters and further updates.

For further information contact Barry Moss on 01233 330376 or email barry.moss@ashford.gov.uk



Winter WORDSEARCH ~ Win £20!



Find these 10 words: FIGGY PUDDING • TURKEY GOOSE • CHRISTMAS CAKE • STUFFING • BRANDY BUTTER • EGGNOG • MINCE PIES • CHESTNUTS

Complete the word search and entry form and return in the prepaid envelope. Correct puzzles received by 11 February 2013 will be entered into our prize draw for £20 in shopping vouchers.

Name:

Address:

.....

.....

Phone/email:

Terms & conditions: Please complete and return this entry form along with your completed word search to Housing News, Ashford Borough Council, Civic Centre, Tannery Lane, Ashford, Kent TN23 1PL. The decision of the editor is final and no correspondence will be entered into.
Closing date for entries is 11 February 2013

“Ashford BACK CHAT”

CALLING ALL TENANTS AND LEASEHOLDERS

We are trying to improve the way that we consult with our tenants and leaseholders. To help us do this we are developing a database of people who are interested in talking to us about the way that we deliver the housing services and want to get involved in some way or another.

There are currently over 800 tenants and leaseholders registered.

You can choose the way you want to be involved, for example taking part in the occasional survey or joining the new Tenants' Panel, and decide which topics you would like to have a say about.



Who can join Ashford Back Chat?

All tenants and leaseholders of Ashford Borough Council are welcome to register.

Why should you get involved?

We want you to help us ensure that we are providing the right services for you. We need your comments - good and bad - to help us achieve our goal to provide quality homes and services, and communities where people want to live.

This helps us, but what's in it for you?

Potential benefits include:-

- Increased knowledge of our services
- Knowing your contribution changes and shapes our services
- Getting to know other residents
- Learning new skills
- Gaining confidence

How much time will it take?

This depends on how you want to get involved and how much time you have to spare. A survey carried out over the phone may only take a few minutes whereas attending a meeting of a tenants' group normally takes two to three hours. It is up to you to choose the type of involvement that best suits you.

What experience or skills do I need?

The most important things that you have are experience of using our services and an enthusiasm for helping us improve the way that we do things. We can provide training and other learning opportunities for you, as well as assistance with travel and care costs.

What if I don't want to get involved?

That's fine. We will always keep you informed about things through letters, leaflets and newsletters. We will also consult you personally about things that will directly affect you.

Contacting us

If you have any queries about the Ashford Back Chat database, you can contact us in any of the following ways:

By phone: 01233 330365 or by email: philippa.dale@ashford.gov.uk

Simply complete and return the cut off slip below...

What do you have a view about?

- Day to day repairs
- Planned maintenance
- New council housing
- Choice Based Lettings
- Changes to welfare benefits for working-age people
- Landscape services
- Block cleaning

(Please tick all which apply)

All of the information that you give will be kept completely confidential. It will only be used for the purposes of contacting you about opportunities for involvement.

How would you like to share your views?

- Online surveys
- Phone surveys
- Paper surveys
- Focus groups (small group meeting one or two times looking at a specific issue)
- Tenants' Panel (larger group meeting regularly with staff and councillors considering all housing policies)

Your contact details

Name

Address

Phone / mobile

Email address