

Housing Matters

The housing newsletter of the St Helena Government Edition 2 March 2013

Unlock those empty homes!



Over the last few months we have been in touch with many owners of empty and uninhabitable homes.

Over 20 owners have come forward asking for advice and help to bring their homes back into use. We're also aware that there are a number of publicly funded homes that are lying empty and we want to 'walk the talk' by finding ways of bringing every one of them back into use.

We're also producing a guidance booklet and leaflets for the owners of private homes. Copies will be available on the SHG website and in print from Essex House from mid March. We'll soon be having a noticeboard at Essex House so that people wanting to buy or sell homes and land can make use of it – free of charge.

Empty Homes Matter – Some Key Facts

- *The true number of empty homes is not 748 as the census suggested but between 300 and 400, or 13-17% of all homes. But this is still much higher than the norm elsewhere of 4-7%.*
- *Most empty home owners live on the Island*
- *One third of empty homes could be available to rent immediately while two thirds require repairs*
- *Most owners seek only free advice to help bring their homes back into use and few expect to return the home to use within the next year*
- *Many owners are nervous about renting out and few have an understanding of the legalities*
- *Few if any were interested in anything other than renting at market rates*
- *While most empty homes are self built or mortgaged, most uninhabitable homes are inherited*
- *While most empty homes required minor repairs, most uninhabitable homes (by definition) needed major restoration or demolition*
- *While most empty homes were 20th century, nearly half of the uninhabitable homes were over 100 years old; and*
- *Higher rents are the biggest cause of reductions in the number of empty homes – but they are often beyond the means of local people*

Development News



One of the biggest challenges we face is to encourage developers and builders to invest in St Helena ahead of the airport. We have the land, we can fund some of the work but we still need the builders and developers. There are seven housing sites in the Local Plan. Between March and the end of the year we will be asking what you'd like to see on Half Tree Hollow, Bottom Woods and Bunkers Hill. What else do builders need to encourage new development? Are there community facilities missing or in the wrong place?

We want to help existing builders to grow. At the same time we want to encourage school leavers and people wanting a change of career to join the industry. We'll be at the Economic Development Forum on the afternoon of March 7th to discuss our plans and budgets. We'd like to work with builders who can take on and train apprentices and people wanting a career change.

Hotel developers are showing increasing interest in prime sites, such as the Ladder Hill Fort. This will have an impact on a small number of Government Landlord tenants. We have provided reassurances that we'll be working closely with them to obtain alternative accommodation as close as possible to where they would prefer to live. Many people will have heard the radio interview with Mantis Hotels about their interest in acquiring the leasehold of the Fort as a possible five star hotel. This is positive news, but there's a long way to go yet. If it does proceed it is likely to be two years before any work begins.

Meet the Planners

The chance to have your say about the future of Half Tree Hollow, Bunkers Hill and Bottom Woods

4th March 4-6 pm Half Tree Hollow Community Centre

7th March 10-12 noon Human Rights Office, Jamestown

7th March 1-3pm Economic Development Forum, PAS

8th March 10-12 Harford Community Centre, Longwood

Calling Young Designers...



During February and March we have sponsored an international competition for young architects and designers to produce a house design for the Island.

We're aiming for homes that make as much use as possible of local materials, are inexpensive to run, easy to adapt for disabled people and do not suffer from the dampness that affects many homes.

We'll be holding an exhibition in April at Prince Andrew School and giving everybody the chance to comment on the shortlisted designs. The competition will help in two ways – first of all to learn from the best in the field and secondly as another way of telling the world that St Helena is changing. More information on the competition can be found on the Government website www.sainthelena.gov.sh

Calling even younger designers!

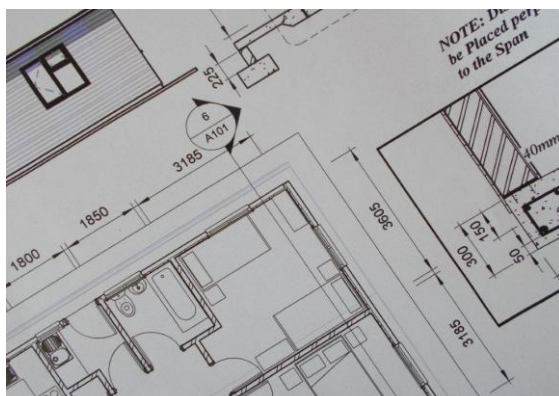
Alongside the international competition we are holding a contest for pupils at the Prince Andrew School to come up with their home of the future. Prizes of Amazon Gift Vouchers have kindly been



donated by Enterprise St Helena. The winner will also be invited to join the jury to decide the international winner.

We hope that this will encourage the next generation of Saints to develop their own skills and take a keen interest in the changes taking place on the Island. We'd like to thank Head Teacher Vanessa, Prince Andrew School and ESH for supporting this initiative.

On site – first new GLH homes for five years



The first new 'purpose built' Government Landlord homes for over five years are being built at Deadwood and Longwood between now and June. Built with steel frames, they will be opened as show houses for a week once completed. Building the new homes will give us an idea of the relative cost, quality and speed with which such homes can be built. We've been converting places like Quincey Vale, Main Street and Bleak House into more homes in recent years, but we're delighted to be building again.

Q&A: consulting you

We'd like to use Housing Matters to give you the chance to have your say.

Our commitment is to respond to each comment we receive. We may not be able to agree with every comment but where we don't we'll explain why. We will also use future editions to reply to each and every comment.

The first comment we've received has been about the cost of holding the housing design competition at a time when we have so many other calls upon UK and SHG funds. We will be awarding £4,000 to the best design and runners up prizes of £3,000 and £2,000. This is our response:



'First of all, holding a design competition is a very cost effective way of attracting the interest of the world's most gifted architects and designers. Whenever anybody builds a house they need somebody to design it and produce plans for builders to use and planners to approve. It is a cost that everyone has to bear and can run to thousands of pounds just for one house. Now bearing in mind that we are aiming to build as many as 60 'exemplar homes' that are free from damp, can be built easily and quickly and cost as little as possible to run, it makes sense to learn from the best. The amount we will spend on the competition is indeed a large sum of money compared with, say, a nurse's salary, but it is a small fraction of the total cost of the housing that we need to build. It is also a one-off cost rather than a long term commitment.

The design competition provides another chance to tell the rest of the world that St Helena is a great place to visit. Great architecture can be part of that appeal. The competition is a way of obtaining more free publicity and improving the way we build our homes. We're being 'joined up' by using our housing funding to contribute to the tourism agenda, gaining thousands of pounds worth of free publicity.

We want to use the housing investment to generate opportunities for apprentices and we are in discussions with ESH and PAS about this. We need to train our builders of the future in the technologies of the future. The design competition will help to tell us just what those skills need to be and how we can develop training for young people and maybe even people wanting a career change.

A last reason is that SHG gets its income from a range of sources and these always come with conditions. SHG successfully bid for a grant from the UK Government for exemplar housing. This will help to generate more of the homes that we need, but we cannot use this money for other purposes, no matter how deserving they are. It is a long term investment in the future of the Island as well as addressing some of the immediate housing problems we face. And, like the airport development, it will put more money into the pockets of construction workers who will in turn spend it locally. I am very conscious of the day to day pressures that poor housing and the shortage of affordable housing creates. The more investment we can attract to the island the easier it will be for these problems to be solved.

I hope that this is a full explanation. There's an awful lot going on at the moment and if anyone is unsure why things are happening it's important that we take the time to explain.'

Andy

Tenants' News



Consulting you: a National Standard

The duty in the SHG tenancy agreement is to provide homes to a 'required' standard, but it is not at all clear what this means. We think that a 'minimum' standard should be that:

- Everyone should have a self-contained home and not have to go outside for the toilet, kitchen or bathroom
- Everybody should have an adequate supply of safe drinking water
- Every home should have a clean and safe means of disposing of foul water with every WC having a wash hand basin
- Every home should be able to collect, store and remove rainwater
- Every home should be free of damp and safe from flooding
- Every home should have adequate lighting, ventilation and power supplies
- Everybody should be safe from fire, falls and other risks to their health
- Everybody should have personal space and privacy in their home

1. Do you agree with this minimum standard?
2. Is there anything missing?
3. Do you agree with the approach that we have suggested?
4. What should we do about homes where we cannot afford to bring them up to this standard?



The work carried out by Tracy Goldsmith in surveying almost every GLH home tells us that every property will need some work to bring it up to the minimum standard. We have already started, by spending £100,000 since last April on 'backlog repairs.' Rewiring has to be a top priority and most homes need new roofs and a hot water system. We are bidding for funding for this and aim to start the rewiring work as soon as the money is available, beginning with the blocks of flats.

If we can obtain the funding it will take around at least three years for every home to be improved.

Some homes may cost too much to repair. In these instances we will have to decide whether to offer them to the residents for sale or rehouse those affected into new homes. We don't expect too many to be affected by this, but would welcome your views.

Doing the job properly

We also think it's important to set high standards for the way in which we approach our work. These could include:

- ensuring that you have plenty of advance warning
- ensuring that you have somewhere to stay during major work, such as re-roofing
- tidying up any mess that we make



Then what?

Once we have all the homes up to the minimum standard it is important to have a 'planned maintenance' programme in place. 'Planned maintenance' is important because, for example, it costs less to replace an old roof than it does to keep repairing emergency leaks and floods. The more we think ahead, the less likely it is that we will need to do things in an emergency. We will know how long everything that makes up your home, from the floors to the roof, will last and can develop a programme to deal with it. Some things may need replacing every ten years while others (such as a roof) can last 30 or more. From this we will know how much it will cost to maintain the homes.

What about improving the homes?

We would like to know what you would ideally like in the way of improvements. A decent kitchen? A modern bathroom? We do, after all, only have a minimum standard. At present there is no funding for this sort of work. Once we know what improvements you would most like to enjoy, we will need to work out how much it will cost. We will then be able to consult you on the ways of achieving this.

Please let us know

- **your views on the minimum standard**
- **what should we do when we cannot afford to bring a home up to the minimum standard?**
- **What standard do you expect of any work?**
- **What other improvements would you like to see?**

Please call in to the housing surgery or write to 'Housing Matters' at Essex House, Jamestown to let us know by the end of March.

Rent Arrears – how can we reduce them?

Most tenants pay their rent on time but unfortunately around one in three tenants fail to do so. At the end of 2012, 53 tenants owed more than a month in rent. A small number owe a very high amount; 16 owe over £1,000. And of course the less we collect, the less able we are to spend on repairs and other services. We will take a firm but fair approach to rent arrears - helping those who need it and if necessary taking legal action against those who ought to be able to pay.

In 2013 we will be spending a lot more time chasing rent arrears. If you are struggling to pay your rent please contact us as soon as possible – the sooner we can help the easier it will be.

How do we pay for the housing service?

Running a housing service, like everything, costs money. So the amount of rent we charge and collect is really important for the repairs and improvements that are needed to ensure that your home is safe and comfortable.



Rent normally pays for:

The cost of **building** your home in the first place

- The **repairs** that SHG is responsible for
- Any **improvements** over time (such as new bathrooms)
 - Collecting the **rent** and tackling rent arrears
- Looking after the **estate** you live on, including , for example the removal of abandoned cars
 - Tackling **anti-social behaviour**
 - Communication and **consultation**
- The **salaries and office costs** of staff involved in providing the service

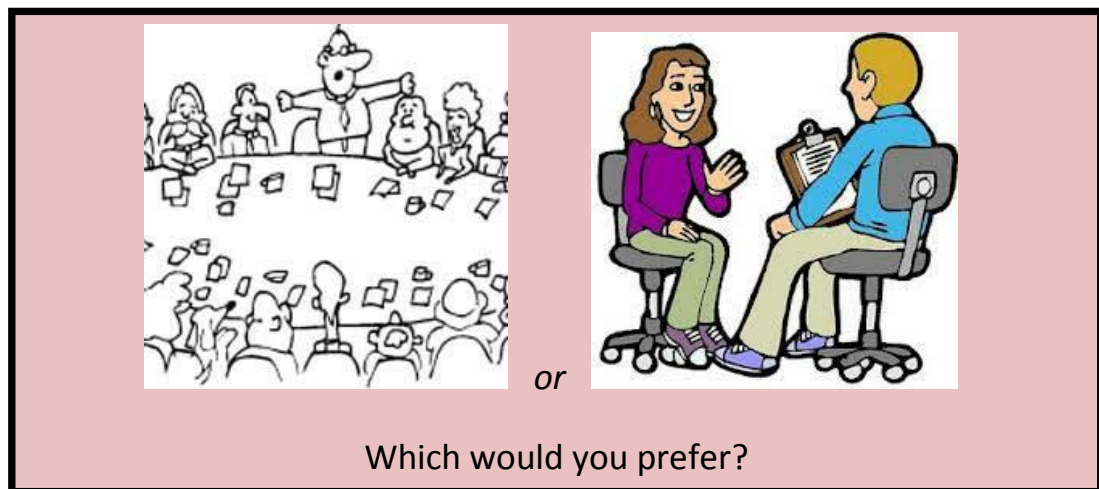
For many years the rents charged by the Government have not been enough to pay for many of these services. As a result some services, such as planned maintenance (where, for example, roofing is replaced before it becomes leaky) and improvements (such as more electric sockets) have sometimes not been provided. The Government has also subsidised the service, with many costs 'hidden'. Just the cost of bring homes up to the minimum standard will be the equivalent of about ten years' rent payments. This is not a situation that can continue forever and over the next year we aim to consult with you on changes to the way that the service is paid for which are affordable, fair and meet the true cost.

In the meantime, to keep pace with inflation and as a result of no increase last year, the Government plans to increase rents by £1 a week from July 2013.

Nobody likes to pay more for a service, whether it is their home, their food, their clothing or their car. If you would like to comment on the increase or suggest ways of making rents fairer in the longer term, please contact your Councillor or Andy.

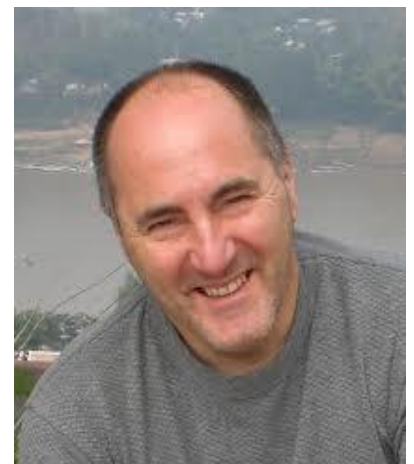
Would you like to get more involved?

Hopefully, by reading 'Housing Matters' you will realise that we genuinely want you to have your say. Some ways of getting involved suit some people and other ways suit other people. Formal meetings like the one below work for some people but not for others. So during 2013 we'll be trying out different ways and seeing which ones work for you and which ones don't.



This NEWSLETTER is the first way. You can let us know what you like and what you don't like about it. If you'd like me to answer any housing question in the next edition then please email me at housing.executive@sainthelena.gov.sh

- In March I'll be holding a Thursday Morning Surgery at The Human Rights Office, Jamestown - if you would like to exchange views on any housing matter (including those we mention in the newsletter) then please call in; from 10am to 12 noon. Speaking in public is said to be one of the things people fear most. So here's an opportunity to express yourself without having a big audience. If this one works then I'll hold others at Levelwood and Longwood.
- We're keen to meet up with builders and self-builders to work out what they need to deliver the homes we want to build
- I'd also like to help set up a Tenants Forum of representatives from across the Island. If you feel that you can represent the views of all of your neighbours (and not just your own!) then please let me know. We'll be working with the Civil Society groups to ensure that the Forum is independent and can provide constructive criticism.



I've been doing this type of work since 1985, when I set up the very first Residents Associations in the New Forest in Hampshire. One of them was the Association for Tristan Close – an estate built to house the people of Tristan da Cunha after the 1961 volcano. Who'd have thought that 27 years later I'd be getting residents involved on Tristan's next door neighbour?

If anyone would like to have a talk in the street, shops or their own home I'll find the time. I hope to meet every tenant in the coming year, so feel free to seek me out.

Thanks for reading the newsletter. If you'd like us to cover any other subject or would like to contribute, please let me know.

Andy Crowe, Housing Executive

HOUSING MATTERS

Have your say

What improvements would you like to see where you live?

Heard of the Comprehensive Development Areas?

What do you think of the housing service?

Heard a rumour?

Want to get involved?

If you have a question or want to make a comment please visit the Human Rights Office in Jamestown (close to the market) on Thursdays from

10am – 12 noon

throughout March 2013

OPENING FEATURE March 7TH

Meet the Planners

New homes are expected to be built at Half Tree Hollow, Bottom Woods and Bunkers Hill over the coming years. We'd like to know what you would like to see on these sites. If you live nearby or would like to make any suggestions then please call by to let us know.