

Housing Matters

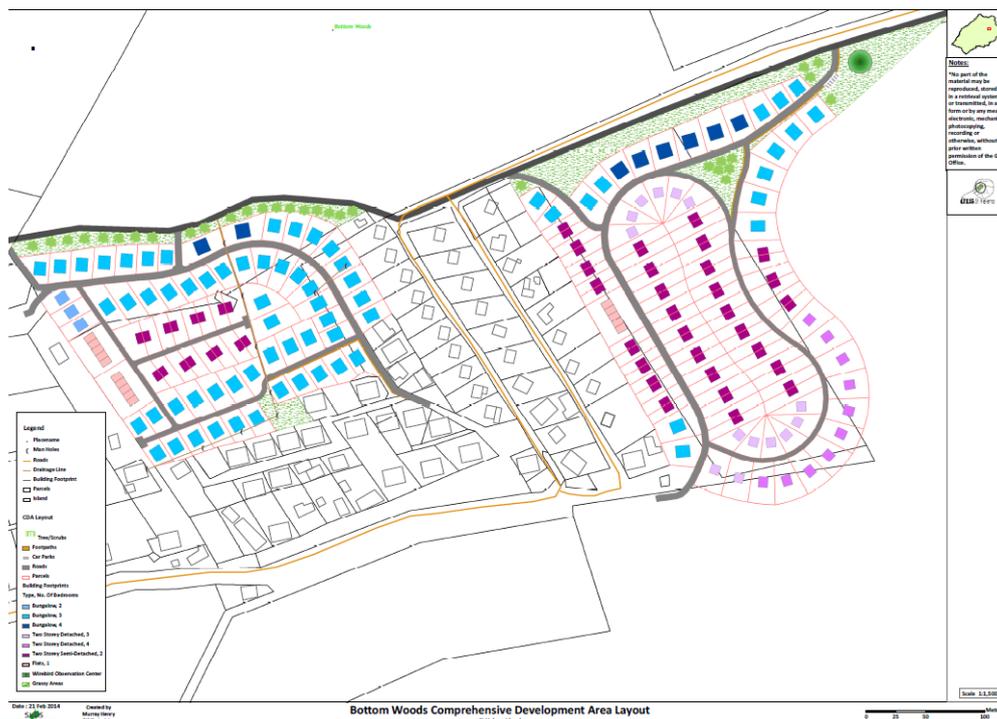
The housing newsletter of St Helena Government Edition 4 May 2014

Inside: Half Tree Hollow Held Up, Quincey Vale Empty Homes Now Refurbished, a New Housing Register, the Housing Annual Report, What's an ALMO?

Bottom Woods - the New Gateway to St Helena?

In the last edition we shared the plans for a new housing development at Half Tree Hollow. This time we feature the proposals for Bottom Woods. We are aiming to create a modern estate with an 'Endemic Trail' from a multi-purpose Wirebird Observation Centre, with a cafeteria and shop, through the development itself. We're sure that the front line homes looking across to the Barn and Flagstaff Hill will be very popular and we are earmarking several plots for low cost home ownership.

'Given that this will be the first housing development that air travellers will see when they arrive on St Helena it is really important that we get it right' says Councillor Les Baldwin, who chairs the Social and Community Development Committee. *'This is an opportunity for people to comment before a planning application is submitted, so we have time to improve it as best we can.'* Plans have been circulated to local residents and are on display at Essex House – please let us know what you think.



Half Tree Hollow Hold Up

Sadly we've not been able to sign a contract yet for the infrastructure work at Half Tree Hollow. Four builders had expressed interest but we only received one valid bid and it didn't meet our requirements.

'You always expect problems with housing developments' says Housing Executive Andy Crowe. *'In the UK it is normally objections from NIMBY neighbours. We've been delighted that local people are so keen to see the houses built, but it's a difficult site and the building industry has never been so busy as it is now. But we'll re-tender it in the near future and look at other solutions.'*

'The people I feel most disappointed for are the residents of Ladder Hill, who have had this uncertainty for over a year now. We'll be keeping them informed of what is happening.'



Bamboo Investor Wanted

It's a year now since BAT HUT!, the Spanish architects, won our design competition. Local people and our Jury of Saints agreed with what many of the entrants told us : if you want a material that can be grown locally, that is ant resistant and which looks great then go for bamboo. How about replacing the flax, which has little use, with bamboo? It grows quickly and when processed can be extremely strong.

But we and the winning architects have struggled to find anyone to come forward with a bamboo business plan. We haven't given up, though. If there's a Saint who shares our vision of a sustainable, low cost housing solution then we will do everything we can to make it become a reality. It might just be a one-off 'demonstration house or a full blown business plan to grow and process enough bamboo to build 10 - 15 homes a year. Bamboo is just one of many business opportunities that St Helena can offer, especially after the airport opens. Will you be the one who takes advantage of it?



If you share our vision contact Andy on 22270 or call in at Essex House. We can even find ways of helping you develop a business plan.

Need a Home? Get registered!

If you or a member of your family needs a place to live, but can't afford to buy or rent, we can offer a simpler and fairer way to get a Government house. Applications are open to people:

- With a 'permanent right of residence' on St Helena.
- Not having any other home
- Who cannot afford to buy or rent on the open market

Applications will be split into those with a housing need - overcrowded, in homes below the national minimum standard, or homeless or with extra priority on certain medical grounds. After this, offers will be made of suitable housing in date order. We think this is the fairest way of deciding. 'Suitable' housing will depend upon your income and size of household.

There will be a right to a review of any decision we make. If you have been told you are not eligible but think you are, then please spend a few minutes completing an application form.

Empty Homes

Quincey Vale gets a Makeover

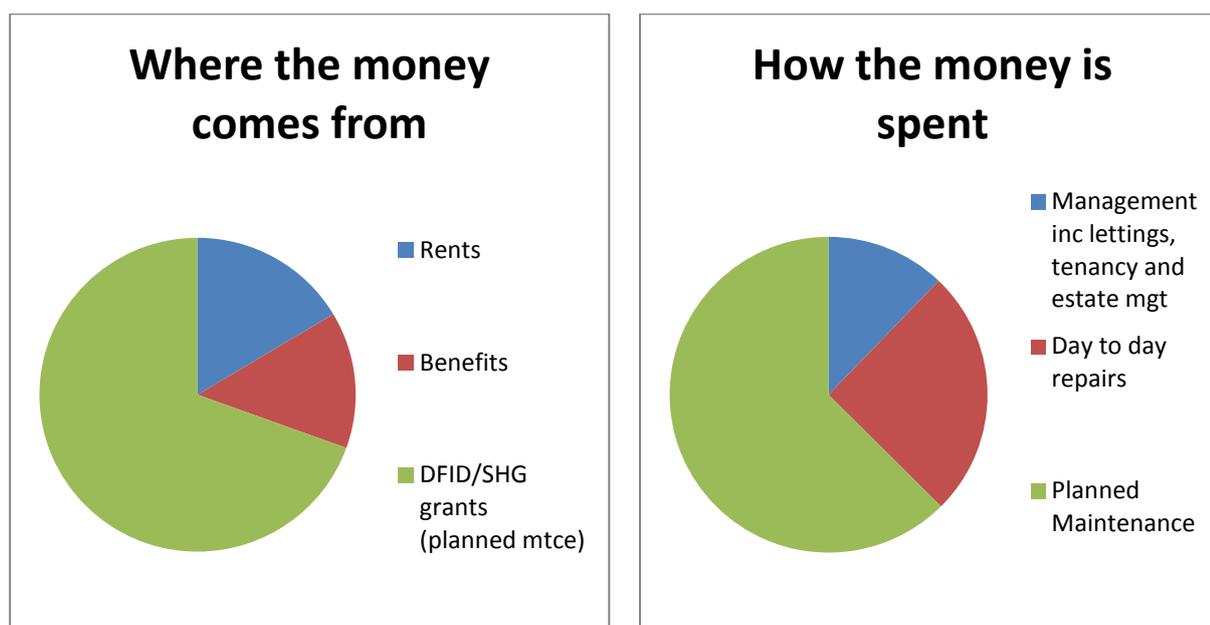
Single people and couples wanting to live in Levelwood will now be able to apply for one of seven fully modernised homes. If you would like to be part of this small new community please get in touch.

“Quincey Vale had been empty for several years before we took it into the housing stock and so I’m pleased that we are ‘walking the talk’ on empty homes” says Building Surveyor Tracy Goldsmith.

News for Government Tenants

Rents Increased

This year sees another annual £1 a week rent increase. This is above the rate of inflation, but with rents averaging around £16 a week, they only pay for a fifth of the cost of the service. This year a record amount is being spent on ‘backlog repairs’ - £385,000 - mainly on rewiring work to flats and full refurbishment of empty homes, such as those at Quincey Vale. This compares with the £160,000 that is collected in rents.



Major Consultation Exercise to take place in July and August

During this period our aim is to make contact with every tenant to find out:

- What you like and don't like about the housing service?
- Why do we need to spend so much on the maintenance of the homes?
- Views on changes to the tenancy conditions, for example making it clearer what our responsibilities are, increasing some responsibilities and removing others

- Finding out how we can consult in future – do evening meetings really work for you?

We'll be knocking on doors and calling on the phone to make contact. If you would like to call in at Essex House we'll be happy to speak to you face to face.

Now You Can Buy Your Home

After a few years in which house sales were put on hold, tenants once again have the opportunity to buy. If you have been a tenant of a Government home for five years and have been a good rent payer, you may be entitled to buy your home. If you would like a copy of our question and answer sheet or would like to apply, please contact Gina Henry at Essex House on 2270

What's an ALMO?

Is it a bird? Is it a plane?

ALMO is short for 'Arm's Length Management Organisation' and it is one of the ways in which Government homes may be managed in the future. ALMOs were the highest rated housing organisations in England when the UK Government inspected housing services (up to 2011). They are known for having tenants on the Board and for achieving the biggest value for money improvements of all housing services. By being so highly rated they were able to attract large sums of Government funding to recently bring 800,000 dilapidated UK homes up to a high standard.

'In my time as a housing inspector I inspected many ALMOs, in places as different as Derby, Leeds, London and Poole' says Housing Executive Andy Crowe. 'It may well be that there are Saints in Poole whose homes are managed by the Poole ALMO. I was really impressed by the amount of customer care and tenant involvement in these organisations. Tenants were seen as partners and benefited from huge improvements.'

How soon for St Helena?



The Government's independent watchdog, the Audit Commission, has rated Poole Housing Partnership as "excellent" in their recent inspection of the organisation. The inspection team gave the service an 'excellent', three stars rating. This is because customer satisfaction is high for services that are easy to access and increasingly tailored to the needs of individual tenants. The repairs and maintenance service is very effective; anti-social behaviour is addressed well; and the service provides very good value for money.

The Audit Commission's Lead Inspector for the South West, Kieren Colgan, says, "PHP staff know exactly what their tenants want and have a tenacious focus on delivering it. The service they give provides very good value for money. There are very few social housing providers who cannot learn from the example



Feedback from Recent Consultations

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.

In the last issue we asked for your views on who we should be housing. Disappointingly we only received one comment. Housing Executive Andy Crowe comments: *"I would really urge anybody interested in the future of housing to let us have their views. We don't know everything and it's no good saying 'nobody listens' if you don't say anything!"*

The comment we received was to ask: ***how could we prevent people who don't get on from being housed next to each other?***

'Under our new policy we must offer each vacancy to the household that is top of the list for that type of home' says Tracy Thomas, who manages the waiting list. 'While none of us can pick and choose our neighbours there will be times when it would be wrong to move somebody next to, say, an ex partner who they have been violent towards.'

'Should this happen we will consult an expert panel of officers to get their views. If they agree that it would be wrong to let the home in line with the policy we will offer it to the next on the list. We will let the person at the top of the list know. They will be entitled to make a formal complaint and would of course normally be in line for the next vacancy.'

The comment was reported to both the SCD Committee and ExCo who agreed that this would be the fairest solution.

A Note from the Housing Executive

2013/14 Annual Report for Housing

As part of the housing service's commitment to openness and accountability we will be producing annual reports on what we have achieved – and equally what we haven't achieved – over the previous year. Our report is below and I've tried to avoid filling it with lots of financial information, instead concentrating on 'outcomes.'

What's an 'outcome'? It's best described as 'improvements that customers will recognise'. So this report is what we can be proud of and what we need to work harder on. And it's a short report – straight to the point and in plain English.

In development

- We now have planning permission for 65 homes at Half Tree Hollow with really positive public support
- We've an estate layout for over 150 new homes at Bottom Woods which we have begun to consult on
- We have a 'design standard' for new homes, which incorporates accessibility for wheelchair users, solar heating and water retention. We think it's a great design.
- We completed the first new Government homes for many years, using modern steel frame technology

However

- It's taken far longer to get the work under way because of the shortage of technical staff on the Island – design by email is a nightmare and contractors are up to their eyes in work on the airport, wharf, Longwood House and so many other projects
- The new homes took much longer and cost more than they should have
- No investors have come forward yet with a 'bamboo business plan' – the one real hope for a truly sustainable building industry which doesn't have to import most materials.

In housing management

- The amount of rent arrears fell for the first time in many years
- Health and safety issues at the Jamestown flats have been addressed
- We've tackled 22 housing management issues relating to general complaints and pest control.
- We've worked closely with the Social Care and Police services to prevent harm to vulnerable people and the general public

However

- Homelessness reared its ugly head, with women fleeing domestic violence and families being evicted by their own relatives, meaning that several homes had to be offered as temporary tenancies while the victims sorted out their lives.
- Some estate management problems, notably gardens being used as breakers' yards, have been very difficult to solve.

In asset management

- We now have a minimum standard for Government Landlord housing

- 27 government homes and 3 chief secretary homes were refurbished during the year
- A major planned maintenance programme began with the rewiring of the flats in Jamestown, and we expect to spend £385,000 next year as well.

However

- The cost of bringing the homes up to the minimum standard is far higher than predicted - equal to over three times what we charge in rent, for each of the next 30 years



Bottom Woods – a large new settlement for St Helena?

I can't finish the report without thanking the people who have done so much to lay the foundations for a dedicated housing service. Tracy Goldsmith really knows her stuff as a qualified Building Surveyor and has worked hard to complete the surveys of over 200 Government homes. She's also worked on what we need to spend, based upon current building costs. Tracy Thomas has settled in really well to her post as Housing Management Officer, so that we now carry out all of the letting of properties, some of the arrears work and far more time on estate management. She is working hard on gaining a professional housing qualification, too. Thanks to Paul and Edyta of ProArc who produced the house designs and a great public exhibition to gain so much local support for our planning application. Then there's Gina, Glynis, Michael, Gibby and the rest of the maintenance team who work hard to keep the homes habitable.

Some of the 'outcomes' aren't easy to put numbers to – for example, how much harm has been prevented by the cooperation that takes place between housing and the Police service, for example removing someone to a place of safety? Hard to measure, but we think it's important.

This is beginning to sound like an Oscar speech so I'll stop here and say a general thank you to everyone who I haven't got round to mentioning and to those people who took the time to respond to our consultations, those who turned out at the Half Tree Hollow planning meeting and those who asked the difficult questions.

We still have a long way to go. You can't reverse a generation of the service being overlooked in a year. We cannot rely upon DFID funding forever. At the moment we are just getting the basics right, like ensuring that everybody's home is safe. But things are moving along.

Andy Crow

Housing Executive