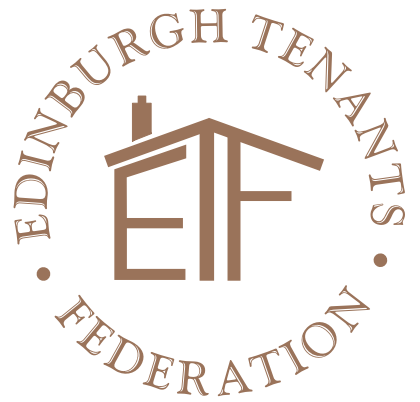


Tenants Voice



Issue 71: April 2009



Another Successful Burns Night

The Federation's Burns Night on Wednesday 28th January was a roaring success with an excellent turnout and an enjoyable night for everyone. We packed out the function suite of the Victoria Park Hotel, our venue for the evening.

Starting with the 'business' side of the evening there was a positive response to the work that the Federation had done in the past three months. The council's proposal to start building affordable homes

drew quite a lot of interest from the members and will no doubt be the focus of future meetings as the project develops. Most of the questions raised focused on the proportion of homes allocated for social rent, as members were keen to see this figure as high as possible. We were also glad to see the 'well kent face' of Federation Honorary Life President George McKie, who joined in the proceedings. Welcome back George!

After the traditional haggis, bashed neeps and tatties, the social side of the evening kicked off with the entertainment again provided by North Sea Gas, a group well known and appreciated by the members.

Davie Thomson
Redbraes Residents Association

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To the Editor

I was delighted to read Betty Stevenson's article in last month's Tenants Voice highlighting her work supporting tenants with mental health problems and raising awareness. Within each of our local communities there will be people living with mental health issues, be they service users carers, neighbours etc.

Edinburgh Carers Council is an organisation made up of individual carers, carers from carer support groups and other carer organisations. It is open to anyone who supports someone who has a mental health problem or who uses mental health services.

We provide carers with information about all aspects of mental health care and services as well as an individual advocacy service. In addition we ensure that the views and needs of carers are included at all stages of the planning and development and implementation of mental health services in Edinburgh.

I have always been very interested in housing issues and have often been intrigued that housing has so little representation within mental health organisations. This is particularly relevant in relation to the planning and delivery of mental health services. In some areas this has been addressed; however it still has some way to go.

Housing, communities and the environment are instrumental in affecting people's mental health and well-being. The community in which we live plays its part. If you have a neighbour with a mental health problem then it would be neighbourly to take account of this and help support that person to feel part of the community in which they live.

Stacey Webster from Link Living recently joined our Management Committee. I would encourage other organisations to get housing involved. The Scottish Recovery Network promotes the importance of people living well with or without symptoms. I would recommend people look at their website, at www.scottishrecovery.net, as it's both informative and inspiring.

Our housing, our environment, and our communities need to know and understand the issues surrounding mental health. Let's promote this by encouraging more people from housing to get involved.

Linda MacLeod
Edinburgh Carers Council

Edinburgh's new rent charging system: How it will work

With the new rent charging system about to take effect, Stuart Orr, Revenues and Debt Manager, at the City of Edinburgh Council answers some of your questions to explain how it will work.

The way we charge rent

We charge about £70 million a year in rent from our 21,000 tenants. This rent money pays for a whole range of services for you as a council tenant.

Each year, the council decides how much rents should increase from the beginning of April. The requirement for us to modernise all Council housing stock to the Scottish Housing Quality Standard by 2015 means the Council will have to increase rents by 2.7% more than inflation each year until 2015 to pay for the necessary improvements. After 2015, we estimate that rents need to increase by inflation only.

Until recently, we had a rent charging system that was considered by many to be very unfair and really complicated. After consultation with tenants last year, we are now introducing a new system that is fairer and easier to understand.

What rent do tenants actually pay at the moment?

The rent that is actually paid by tenants depends on whether they receive a rebate on their full rent through Housing Benefit.

About 25% of tenants pay a full rent – they receive no rebate

About 20% of tenants pay some rent – they receive some rebate

About 55% of tenants pay no rent – they receive a full rebate

The amount of Housing Benefit rebate paid depends on who is living in the house and what income and savings they have. The amount of rent to be paid can also change as circumstances change. Even a small rebate can protect tenants against future rent increases, because Housing Benefit will increase to cover rent increases.

How is the new rent charging system fairer?

Edinburgh's new rent system reduces the wide gaps

previously found between highest and lowest rents. It makes sure that everyone will pay the same amount for the same size and type of home. Our investment in all our properties to meet the Scottish Housing Quality Standard by 2015 will mean there is a better connection between the condition of property and the rent that tenants pay for that property. Housing Benefit is still paid to those tenants who apply and are entitled to it.

How is the new rent charging system easier to understand?

The new system bases rent on just two factors –

- the size of house
- the type of house.

Once the system is fully in place, each home in the new system will be charged one of just nine different rent charges. If you live in a house, you will pay a bit more than if you live in flat. The more rooms you have, the higher the rent you will pay.

From October 2008, all empty Council homes let through the Choice system started being let on the new rents system.

I have been a tenant since before October 08 and I'm on an old system rent. How will my rent change?

For these tenants, there will be a gradual move towards the nine new system rent charges. For some tenants this means their rent will go up, for others their rents will go down.

- The introduction of the new rent will start in April 2009
- The yearly inflation plus rent increase for all tenants will apply every year
- Then, a change in rent charge for each tenant will be applied every year until the correct new system charge is reached
- The change to reach the new rent for each tenant shall be limited to £4 a week a year. This does not apply to the inflation plus increase
- If Housing Benefit is in place, it will also change to reflect these changes

The move to the new rent charging system will protect tenants facing increases to reach their correct new charge by limiting the extra amount each year they are asked to pay. For tenants due

to benefit from a reduction in rent when moving to their correct new charge, the reduction will also be limited each year. These moves will mean that around 90% of tenants should reach their correct new charge by April 2013.

When will I hear about what I've to pay from 6 April 09?

In February the Council agreed the 5.7% yearly rent increase for 2009/10, which calculated the council's inflation costs at 3% and added the agreed 2.7% increase for the Scottish Housing Quality Standard improvement work. We wrote to all tenants at the beginning of March, telling you what your new full rent is from April 6 2009 and how your rent has changed as a result of moving towards your new rent.

For those receiving Housing Benefit, a second letter was sent in the middle of March 2009 confirming what your rent is from April 6 2009 after your rebate is applied.

What help is available if I am on a full rent and my rent is increasing?

Since November 2008, we have been contacting those tenants paying a full rent charge on lower rents who may be facing a larger rent increase as a result of this change. You may be a tenant affected in this way. You could benefit from the help of our Income Maximisation Service before any rent increases are applied to your rent.

Contact Numbers for Income Maximisation Service:

Joyce Boyd	529 7304
Isla Paterson	529 7463

Who can answer any questions I have about the new rent charging system?

Contact Numbers:

Stuart Orr	529 7619
Margaret Tobyn	529 7712
Alan Donald	529 7484
Amie Colbourne	529 7021

Stuart Orr
City of Edinburgh Council

Investing in Affordable Housing: a Consultation

Summary of ETF's Response

The Scottish Government is currently consulting on its proposals for major changes in how housing association grant is allocated. The Government's aim is to achieve greater efficiency in the use of public subsidy to build affordable housing. The changes would lead to:

- The introduction of competition for development funding;
- The creation of 7 regions throughout Scotland for the allocation of funding;
- The establishment of lead developers in each region who can bid for funding for a 5 year development programme.

A draft response has been prepared by the ETF Housing Association Tenants Sub Committee. The draft response is being circulated to member organisations and a special meeting was held on the evening of 11th March to finalise our response in time for the deadline of 17th March.

What follows is a summary of main points made in the draft response. The full and final response is now available on our website www.edinburghtenants.org.uk and from the Federation office.

Summary:

The key challenge facing us is the need for a major and sustained investment in affordable rented housing. The credit crunch and economic recession exacerbate the housing crisis and the need for an expansion in

the provision of affordable rented housing. The priority, therefore, is the development of a thriving affordable rented sector, making it a positive choice for a wider range of people, leading to the creation of sustainable mixed income communities.

The main elements of the reform package are a diversion from this challenge. However, we welcome and support proposals to move to longer-term funding and planning, based and targeted on a strategic assessment of need. These measures are obvious and long overdue.

Investment in affordable housing should be undertaken on the basis of strategic partnerships at a regional level. Partnership working, making efficient use of the best of the skills, experience and resources of the affordable housing sector, not competition, is the key to planned, thriving and sustainable communities.

Proposals for the creation of consortia, but more especially lead developers with the muscle to compete for subsidy, would further fuel the unacceptable push to create ever larger landlord groups and organisations. The existing pressure for mergers is already marginalising those smaller organisations with roots in the local community and a reasonable level of tenant involvement.

Tenant involvement is critical to the development of thriving, sustainable communities both at the strategic and local development planning stages. This key to success, tenant involvement and influence, would be further weakened and eroded by the introduction of measures that would promote competition and ever larger landlord organisations.

Housing Association Tenants Sub Committee

Izzy Duncan

The chair of Cables Wynd Residents Association, Izzy Duncan passed away peacefully on 12th February at St.Columba's Hospice. Izzy was diagnosed with cancer last June. Following some treatment after this first diagnosis she had recovered enough to return to her 'wee job' in the paper shop in Henderson Street. She was back to her usual self and as she said 'just getting on with things' when she fell ill again. Renal cancer was diagnosed and following an operation cancer was found elsewhere. She did not return home following the operation, with her final moments spent in the care of St. Columba's Hospice surrounded by her family.

Izzy was a wee woman but big of heart. She had time for family, friends, neighbours and was a good woman to have on your side. She fought for her fellow residents and managed to get block improvements. The landings, stair well and lifts were all on her agenda. All were

cleaned, graffiti removed, freshly painted and made more welcoming. Another fight meant that the block received the rental money for the phone masts on the block to help towards these improvements. Some of this year's money will be used to pay for a memorial bench outside the block. Izzy was proud of 'the banana flats' and with her fellow residents wanted to make sure it was a good place to live.

I first met Izzy after my election in May 2003. Although only a short time, I was pleased to have known her and glad I could help her improve the banana flats. She leaves behind her husband Jackie, her son Mark & daughter Lesley. Her grandchildren Sean, Zoe, Skye and Jack will miss her along with her brother James and sister Lynda. Half of Leith attended the funeral at Warriston and is testimony to how much she will be missed.

Cllr. Gordon Munro – Leith Ward

The Federation lobbies the Parliaments in support of Council Housing

The Westminster Parliament's Council Housing Group and Defend Council Housing held their annual inquiry session about the position of council housing in February. The Federation was invited to give evidence to the inquiry, and chose to do so in writing rather than send a delegation to Westminster. As well as submitting our written evidence to the inquiry we sent copies to all Edinburgh MPs and MSPs to let them know our position. This is what we said.

Edinburgh Tenants Federation fully supports Defend Council Housing's aims, whilst noting the differences that now exist between Scotland and England.

We are supporting the City of Edinburgh Council to get back into building council houses. A business case has been drawn up and we expect to hear the outcome of the council's bid to the Scottish Government for subsidy by March 2009.

We constantly put the argument that there needs to be a major increase in investment in order to build affordable rented houses, as in Edinburgh the demand far exceeds the supply.

We constantly call for a wiping out of existing debt. We understand the money is available to do this – because it was on the table in 2005 when the previous administrations in both the council chambers and Scottish Parliament pushed for stock transfer in Edinburgh and the tenants rejected it. Writing off the debt would in one fell swoop enable the council to meet the requirement to bring all council houses up to the Scottish Housing Quality Standard by 2015 and develop a programme of council house building.

Linked to that is our longstanding demand to take investment in housing out of the public sector borrowing rules. However, because the debt has not been written off, council tenants in Edinburgh are paying a premium of 2.7% above inflation every year through to 2015 to pay for the improvements required to meet the Scottish Housing Quality Standard. We regard this 2.7% premium as the UK

Government's punishment to Edinburgh's council tenants for voting against stock transfer and voting to stay with the council.

The Scottish Government has allocated £25 million to support council house building across the whole of Scotland. The current plans to build council houses in Edinburgh once again, even if the City of Edinburgh Council is successful in securing some of this subsidy, will require it to sell 50% of all houses it builds in order to produce a cross-subsidy.

We also argue that the credit crunch and economic recession underlines the need for a radical change in policy and a major investment programme for affordable rented housing for two reasons. Firstly, the exclusive promotion of home ownership was never credible, desirable or sustainable. It must now be abundantly obvious that this fixation must end and that the focus must be on developing the affordable rented sector and making renting a positive choice leading to the creation of sustainable mixed income communities. Secondly, on a practical level, investing now in affordable rented housing will provide a lifeline for the construction industry as well as increasing the supply of available housing not just for those that are currently on housing waiting lists but for those who may yet become unfortunate victims of the recession.

To date we have had responses from Housing and Communities Minister, Alex Neil MSP, Malcolm Chisholm MSP, MPs Gavin Strang and Nigel Griffiths, and an acknowledgement but no full response from Alastair Darling MP's office.

In February we met with Lothians MSP Shirley-Anne Somerville to press our case for additional funding for Edinburgh to build new council houses. This was echoed when councillors met with her in the City Chambers. The Federation was mentioned in a debate in Holyrood where Shirley-Anne and other MSPs questioned the new Housing and Communities Minister, Alex Neil on the Scottish Government's plans to help solve Edinburgh's housing problems. We are now trying to set up meetings with politicians from all parties to continue to press the case for housing debt write-off and increased funding to ease the housing crisis in Edinburgh.

News from the Regional Network

All Edinburgh's Registered Tenants Organisations are part of the region 5 network, also known as BEEM because it includes organisations from Borders, East Lothian, Edinburgh and Midlothian. Federation Executive Committee members Tina Beattie and Harry Sunderland were elected last May to represent Edinburgh.

BEEM had a meeting on 19th March at which there was much discussion on the format for our national committee

meeting on 12th May. Our suggestions will now be put to the other regional committees before finalising the format.

BEEM will be holding its AGM and members meeting on 30th May at the Hilton Grosvenor Hotel, starting at 11am and it is hoped to have the new Housing Bill as its topic with the possibility of a senior civil servant attending.

Harry Sunderland
Region 5 Network representative

Telecare

As we get older and live longer, one concern is what will happen to us as we become less mobile and lose some of our independence. Evidence shows that we would prefer to live in our homes for as long as possible.

Services for Communities, through the Assessment and Supported Housing Services team, have been providing the Telecare service for a number of years and have recently been supported by Scottish Government in developing this service further.

The concept of Telecare is to use technology and the very experienced Community Alarm Service alongside normal care services to improve the choices available to people who may wish to remain in their own homes. At present approximately 400 people use the Telecare service and 5000 people use the Alarm Service.

Telecare helps people maintain their quality of life and allow flexible options for people who need care and support. It also provides a great reassurance to family and carers by addressing the safety of relatives and loved ones in their own homes.

For example, a system is available which can cut the cooker off and raise an alarm to the appropriate care

team if a problem is detected such as the cooker being left on for long period or unlit gas escaping. This system allows people to continue to cook independently, but allows carers to manage the potential risks if someone is finding this task difficult by allowing only carers to use the cooker with a special key pad and code if this is required.



White goods such as the microwave, fridge and kettle can be wired to make sure that the fridge or freezer cannot be switched off by mistake.

Heat detectors can be installed to stop a pot burning on the cooker but also detect if clients' homes are too cold - especially important in the winter.

Flood detectors can also be provided which can reduce the likelihood of clients leaving taps on and doing any

damage, the bath temperature can be checked to reduce the number of burns and scalds, and smoke detectors that can raise an alert to a response service can also be fitted.

Telecare allows people who have seizures or toileting issues to be monitored and left in peace without carers constantly worrying through the night, safe in the knowledge they will receive an alert if an issue arises.

Telecare also provides a 'wander alert' which lets carers know if someone has left the house and not returned - this allows family and carers to help manage issues of wandering.

The Telecare team are also looking at other methods to support people to walk safely in their communities and this may include mobile phone and GPS technology.

Services for Communities are looking at how to expand the availability of this new technology to improve the lives of more vulnerable people.

For more information visit www.edinburgh.gov.uk/telecare

Cllr. Norman Work – Vice Convenor, Health, Social Care & Housing Committee

A Community Council for Wester Hailes?

Since there is no Wester Hailes Rep Council any more the community feel that they still want a say in what is going on in their community through the Neighbourhood Partnerships. A meeting was called to see whether a community council could be formed.

Eileen Hewitt, the officer from the Council responsible for setting up community councils, and Cath Tansey from Community Education were invited along to explain how to go about setting up a community council.

There have to be 20 signatures in agreement to set up a community council. There is going to be another meeting to discuss this and to see how the Neighbourhood Councils can fit into this.

People at the meeting felt it was informative and that it would be a shame if the community's voice was no longer heard. However, there were still many unanswered questions that many are keen to get clarification on before making a decision on whether to go ahead.

Maud Wylie
Hailesland Park Neighbourhood Council

Talking Rubbish



Elizabeth Buchan and Trey Jacobs discuss recycling at the Hailesland Park foyer event.

Last year, ETF met with managers from the council's waste management team to learn their plans for improving the service. In a wide-ranging conversation we learned that they didn't think multi-storey residents would be interested in recycling. We challenged their assumption at the time but now our friends in the high rises are proving them wrong.

In previous editions of Tenants Voice we've outlined how a pilot project was set up to look at improving recycling facilities at multi-storeys and to see whether this would reduce the amount of rubbish being thrown down the chutes and whether this in turn has any impact on the number of blocked chutes experienced across the city. Pilot blocks were identified and targeted, with staff from ETF and the council talking

to residents' groups, identifying the best locations for recycling facilities, and getting approval for a wider consultation. Consultations then took place on site, at 'foyer events' where staff explained the proposals and gave advice on recycling. At some events staff have also gone from door to door consulting tenants in their homes. The response has been really good, with lots of tenants keen to recycle more of their waste and glad to have the opportunity to do so. A decision was taken late last year to start rolling the scheme out across all the city's multi-storeys.

The 'foyer events' attract a good attendance, probably because they're held on people's doorsteps and are about a service that will potentially be delivered on their doorstep, but also because people are genuinely interested in doing more to recycle waste. The feedback has always been positive, with the one negative aspect being that tenants often want to be able to recycle more than currently proposed facilities will offer.

We have received anecdotal evidence of fewer blocked chutes and less residual waste being generated where recycling facilities have been introduced, and hope to be able to present more robust evidence of this very soon. In the meantime, if your block needs more recycling facilities, please get in touch with the Federation office and we'll try and help.

Let there be light

For several years North Bughtlin Tenants Association Committee Members have been lobbying the Council about the poor street and off-road pathways lighting in our area. We have attended many site walkabouts over that time, and have repeatedly identified areas of poor lighting with the Council, the Police and with whoever was our landlord at the time. Though these walkabouts produced compelling evidence that upgrades should be done, for years nothing happened.

More recently, we took our concerns to the Western Edinburgh Neighbourhood Partnership and began the process again. Again we arranged and attended several walkabouts, this time, with Neighbourhood Partnership representatives also in attendance. They discovered that many of our lights were obsolete and should have been replaced or upgraded many years previously. By autumn of last year, agreement had been reached on how many were to be upgraded or completely replaced. The final result was that 71 of our lights were identified for replacement or upgrade before the end of the current financial year.

Many of the new lights which are now being installed on off-road pathways will be installed in slightly different places than the removed ones which will help to illuminate those areas which were previously identified by the Police Safety Officer as being areas

of concern. A 'mid-work' site meeting is to be held next week to monitor progress of this work, and this will give us a final figure and hopefully a completion date for this work.

Also being addressed is the underpass lighting repair work we requested. It has been discovered that the current system of lighting in underpasses is now obsolete and a new system is being used when repairs are identified. This will also be discussed at the 'mid-work' meeting, as several of the underpass lights in Bughtlin also need to be replaced.

And finally, our concerns about one particular utilities access hatch on the pathway to Clermiston, which has been a safety issue for more years than even I can remember, is now being addressed - that section of the path has been closed until the repair work is complete.

All of the above work has been achieved by working with our Neighbourhood Partnership by identifying our concerns, and continually working with the Partnership in whatever way is necessary to achieve a solution together. The current works could not have been progressed without the help of Murray Black and other members of the West Edinburgh Partnership team.

Tina Beattie
Secretary
North Bughtlin Tenants Association

What's the big deal on home ownership?

Everyone agrees that there's a housing crisis – that demand is outstripping supply. Everyone agrees that this is a problem for much of the UK. In Edinburgh alone there are around 23,000 people on the housing waiting list. So we need more houses – and everyone seems to agree on that.

But then comes the confusing part; successive governments at both UK and Scotland level have placed increasing emphasis on home ownership. Even now, in the midst of a global financial crisis caused in large part by banks selling mortgages to people who couldn't afford the repayments, government ministers say that the way to get us out of recession is to get the banks to sell mortgages to more people to buy more houses, and they're using billions of pounds of our money to prop up the banks in order for them to do this. Why not solve the housing crisis and simultaneously save the construction industry instead by giving (or lending) money to landlords to build houses that people can rent?

While the recession bites ever harder, repossession rates in the UK are increasing dramatically. 40,000 homes in the UK were repossessed last year, and forecasters expect the number of repossessions to rise still further this year. As more people lose their homes, more people are registering as homeless, which puts more pressure on the rented housing sector.

But what's with this near obsession with home ownership? It's largely a British phenomenon. In much of Europe it's far less common to own your own home, and there's a much larger rented sector offering a good range of both private and social rented housing. The European countries that, alongside the UK, are suffering worst in the current recession are Spain and Ireland, where, as here, there's been a greater emphasis on home ownership until the housing bubble burst.

In the UK the idea of home ownership on a massive scale is still relatively new, having started when Mrs Thatcher introduced the right to buy for council tenants nearly 30 years ago. Over the past thirty years the profile of housing tenure in the UK has changed radically, from council housing being the predominant source of housing to home ownership coming to the fore and rented housing stock levels in the social housing sector decreasing. Home ownership is promoted as something everyone aspires to – yet the downsides of home ownership are rarely mentioned. And at the same time we still have a housing shortage that continues to worsen.

Owning your own home is no guarantee of improved mobility – ask anyone who's trying to sell a house in the current climate just how long it's taking to sell. Compare this with tenants in rented accommodation who generally only have to give a month's notice

before they plan to leave. Owning your own home is a responsibility that doesn't suit everyone. Paying the mortgage is only the beginning – as an owner you're responsible for repairs, maintenance and upkeep of your property, whereas this is generally a landlord responsibility if you're a tenant.

The housing needs of the population are changing – by 2020 over half of us will be living in single person households, which means there will need to be more, smaller, houses to accommodate everyone. The makeup of families is changing; and family break-ups are sadly the reason many people give when registering as homeless: home ownership doesn't help in this situation because even if it's possible to sell the family home and divide the proceeds, it takes time for this to happen and in the meantime one part of the family often needs to find somewhere else to live as a result of the break-up.

Meanwhile, as we watch our government plough ever more of our money into propping up the banks, their rationale seems to be ever more out of touch with reality. They still want people to become homeowners, and yet the economic climate is likely to make it harder for first time buyers to get onto the housing ladder in future. Mortgages will be harder to come by as what's left of the banking sector will be unwilling to take the same degree of risk as in the past. We've probably seen the last of mortgages that are worth more than the house is; indeed potential buyers will probably have to stump up hefty deposits while at the same time with such low interest rates it'll take longer for them to save up in the first place. It'll be harder to get credit without an impeccable credit history. Yet we will still need to be housed, in ever greater numbers.

So what's to be done? I believe that attitudes towards home ownership must change. Being a homeowner is not the be-all and end-all that some would have us believe, and for some it's neither feasible nor desirable. However, while there's a shortage of alternative accommodation, for some people it's the only way to ensure that they have somewhere to live, even though they may not always be able to afford it. Because of the stigma often associated with social rented housing, I believe that too often people have been forced into buying their own home.

Perhaps our politicians should use the opportunities thrown up by the recession and global banking crisis to reconsider the population's growing – and changing – housing need and how best to meet that need. Mixed communities, offering a full range of types of housing and a mix of rented and privately owned houses that meets the changing needs of our population, must surely be the way forward.

Nikki Thomson
Edinburgh Tenants Federation, writing in a personal capacity

Tenant Participation: the reasons, routes and results

Edinburgh Tenants Federation celebrates its 20th birthday next year. Since 1990 a lot of hard work, time and dedication has been invested in creating better conditions for Edinburgh's tenants. Housing standards, repairs, rent levels and regeneration are only a few of the issues that the Federation has vigorously pursued over the years.

The majority of people reading this article would agree that the Federation has become one of the leading tenants' federations in Scotland. This is tribute to the groundwork of four founder members, who had to fight hard for a place at the table to represent tenants' concerns with the City of Edinburgh Council. Having won recognition and respect for their work, over time a working partnership between the Federation and the council was established and – with the occasional hiccup – continues to thrive. As the housing association sector within Edinburgh has grown up alongside council housing, the Federation is also working to build its profile amongst Registered Social Landlords, and increasingly some of its work is with whole communities, regardless of tenure.

All of the foundations laid by our predecessors within Edinburgh Tenants Federation have made it possible for ordinary tenants like you and me to get involved with our landlords and play a more active part in the process. The Federation was at the forefront of the campaign to get tenant participation made a legal requirement of landlords when the Housing (Scotland) Act was being created. The present Federation Executive Committee is committed

not only to retaining the partnership with the council but also to build similar relationships with other landlords, and to establish new ways of enabling tenants' voices to be heard on all housing related issues, and to help make our communities better, safer and attractive places to stay. You now have an opportunity to take part in this work.

There are many ways to get involved, from getting more active within your local tenants' group or setting one up if there isn't one in your area. There are regular group meetings on different matters that the Federation is working on, such as repairs, high flats and Housing Association tenants. Each group meets regularly, most are open to all, and some are attended by staff from the Council or RSLs. These meetings give tenants an opportunity to give their views in order to help improve the services our landlords provide.

If you don't have time to make a regular commitment, you could participate in occasional consultations about housing issues, either in the comfort of your own home or by attending consultation events. You could write for Tenants Voice about your experiences of being a tenant or about housing issues that you feel strongly about.

Our website at www.edinburghtenants.org.uk has details of much of the work we do and briefings outlining some of our policy positions, often worked up in response to government consultations. You could help us contribute to that.

Tenant Led Inspections give tenants an opportunity to examine in depth

how a particular housing service works and, working as part of a team with other tenants, provide the landlord with recommendations on how the service can be improved. From our experience in the pilot inspection last summer, the landlords we inspected responded very positively to our recommendations and are currently working to put them in place.

And of course, if you're involved in your local tenants' group and are perhaps interested in getting involved at a citywide level, you could always consider standing for election to the Federation's Executive Committee at our AGM in June.

As a volunteer, the Federation recognises that your time is valuable and we never expect people to take on more work than they're comfortable with. The Federation staff provide support to us all, and we learn a lot from working with other likeminded tenants and the housing staff we come into contact with.

In summary, Edinburgh Tenants Federation's workload continues to expand as its reputation grows. It works hard to improve the services tenants can expect from their landlord. But if we are to continue with this work, we really need more tenants to get involved and help share the load. Why not come and join us? Call the Federation office on 0131 475 2509 for a chat with staff about the different ways in which you can be involved.

David Thomson
Redbraes Residents Association

Finance Training 2009

The Federation is again offering training to groups wanting to know how to handle their finances more easily.

Following suggestions from last year's participants, we're separating out the book-keeping workshop and running it on its own on Saturday 25th April. It's a very informal, hands-on course that has received excellent feedback from those taking part before. The venue and exact timings have yet to be confirmed but lunch and refreshments will be provided, and we can help with transport and childcare if necessary. More publicity will

be sent out to members shortly, and we urge members to book early to avoid disappointment.

New to the Federation's calendar is our Grant Applications surgery on Wednesday 29th April. Federation staff will be offering one-to-one advice on how to fill out the council's grant applications and how to work out how much money your group needs. Again more publicity will be sent out to our members very soon, but appointments will be available throughout the day and evening appointments will also be available. If you know this would be of use to your group, contact Mary at the Federation office on 0131 475 2509 to book your slot.

Tailor made protection for tenants

What would you do if a fire damaged your home? What about your TV, DVD player – that new sofa? Or imagine if a neighbour's leaky pipe ruined your carpet! How much would it cost you to replace your possessions?

Council tenants can now enjoy the same protection and peace of mind as home owners, with an insurance package designed just for them. The Council's Insurance Manager, explains: 'Often Council tenants think that they can't get good value insurance, or that it is too complicated. We've done all the hard work and come up with a great deal. Tenants who have taken out a policy find it easy and convenient.'

Getting insured is easy and good value with the special package the City of Edinburgh Council has negotiated specifically for Council tenants. Tenants home contents insurance will pay to repair the effects of a fire or water damage, and replace stolen items with new ones. You're even covered if you lose your house keys and you don't have to pay any excess if you make a claim. An

application form along with a summary of the cover can be sent to you on request.

Because the insurance team at the Council have arranged this package especially for Council tenants, you won't have to add locks to your windows or doors and you can pay fortnightly, along with your rent.

If you'd like to protect your possessions, get in touch with the Council for more information. You can call 0131 529 4399, email insurance.services@edinburgh.gov.uk or write to Greg Campbell at:

Insurance Services
The City of Edinburgh Council
Level 3 Waverley Court
4 East Market Street
Edinburgh EH8 8BG

The application form is also available on the Council website. Simply print one off, complete it and return it to Insurance Services.

In the Spotlight: Harry Sunderland

1. Who are you?

I'm Harry Sunderland, born in Yorkshire and moved to Scotland in the early sixties. I spent my teenage years in Dumfries and Galloway where I did a variety of jobs including fisherman, auxiliary coast guard, barman, cook, charter boat skipper, and film extra. I then moved about Scotland in Hotel Management before settling in Edinburgh in 1980, where I've been ever since.

2. What attracted you to work with ETF?

I first came into contact with ETF when looking for independent information and guidance in setting up our local tenants' group, and my involvement has grown from there.

3. What's the most interesting aspect of working with ETF?

I like meeting interesting people, both tenants and officials, and trying to influence decisions and outcomes.

4. What's the most challenging aspect of working with ETF and how did/do you cope with it?

For me the most challenging aspect of my involvement with ETF has been getting the Federation to recognise housing associations and to understand that housing association tenants' input is as valuable as council tenants' input. I think we're now making progress but it's only come about through sheer persistence.

5. What would you like to see the Federation doing in



the future?

Most of our work at present is with mainstream tenants. I'd like to see the Federation working more with tenants in sheltered housing, Black and Minority Ethnic tenants, and younger tenants.

6. What do you do in your spare time?

I paint, play music and drink beer, though not necessarily in that order!

7. What's your favourite joke?

This is the only clean joke I could think of!

Q: What's the difference between a Brussels sprout and a bogey?

A: You can't get kids to eat Brussels sprouts.

From the Convenor

I want to bring you up to speed on what the Federation's been doing with respect to the council's plan to build new council houses in Edinburgh. Representatives have been kept very busy meeting with staff from the regeneration and investment team as they put the finishing touches to their funding bid to the Scottish Government. The Scottish Government has set up a £25 million fund for council house building, and councils have been invited to submit bids. A lot of work has gone into preparing Edinburgh's bid, and the council expects to hear whether it has been successful by the end of March.

The next stage was to appoint consultants to carry out more detailed masterplanning in each of the regeneration areas. I have been part of the panel working on this, from designing the project specifications, shortlisting the applications and interviewing those that had been shortlisted. As I write this, the decision has been made as to the successful companies that we'll be awarding contracts to, but the details have not yet been made public.

Obviously all this work that has been done already relies heavily on getting some of the money that the Scottish Government will be awarding, so lobbying the politicians at Holyrood is important. With this in mind, a delegation from the Federation went to meet Shirley-Anne Somerville MSP, to ask her to press Edinburgh's case for additional funding.

We also wrote to all the Edinburgh MPs and MSPs to call for the abolition of the council's residual housing debt and for increased investment in social rented housing. So far we have had replies from Nigel Griffiths MP, Malcolm Chisholm MSP and Alastair Darling MP's assistant has acknowledged our letter. If the UK Government wrote off the residual housing debt, in one



fell swoop the council would have the money it needs to build many more new houses and to bring the existing housing stock up to modern standards ahead of the 2015 Scottish Housing Quality Standard deadline and without above inflation rent increases.

Meanwhile, the Council voted to support the proposals for new council house building at their meeting on 3rd March, so we are all hoping for a positive response from the Scottish Government as the more grant funding we obtain from them, the more houses for rent we'll be able to see built.

Tenants' groups in the regeneration areas of Gracemount and North Sighthill are already working hard with the council to plan for the future, and likewise representatives for Pennywell. I'm pleased to report that over the past few weeks a new group has been set up in the Royston Wardieburn regeneration area to represent tenants' views and to begin negotiations with the council over the refurbishment of their homes and the future improvement of their area.

Federation reps have been so busy over the last few weeks that the Burns Supper we held at the end of January now seems a very distant memory. It was good to see so many people there – we certainly filled the room that night! It would be even

better if we managed to attract so many people to all our meetings and not just social events, because then we could get more people's views on the work that we do. I hope that all of you who came to the Burns Supper will come to our next Federation Meeting on 27th April.

Finally for this issue I would like to report on some changes within Edinburgh Building Services. As you may recall, back in 2004 the council brought in a firm of consultants called Pinnacle to work with EBS to provide management support, and to turn the organisation around. At the time we were sceptical about bringing in outside help but over the years the Pinnacle team has worked extremely hard and we've all seen a lot of changes to our repairs service as a result. Pinnacle have now completed their work and officially left EBS in February. The team at EBS feel confident that they can continue to build on the foundations laid by working with Pinnacle – and now we must hope that they can live up to this and that we continue to see improvements in the way our repairs are handled. I'd like to thank Pinnacle for the work they have done, and wish the EBS management team well as they take on their new responsibilities.

Betty Stevenson
Convenor, ETF

Dates for Your Diaries

22nd April

Repairs Group, Southside Community Centre,
Nicolson Street, 7pm – 9pm

25th April

Training for Treasurers, vtbc

27th April

Federation Meeting, Leith Parish Halls, Henderson
Street, 7pm – 9pm

29th April

Grant Applications Surgery, Norton Park, 57 Albion
Road, book your slot by calling 475 2509

12th May

Region 5 Network Tenants' Conference, Hilton
Grosvenor Hotel, Haymarket

16th May

TIS conference on the Housing Bill,

Edinburgh Training Centre, St Mary's Street.

Contact TIS on 0141 248 1242 for more details

25th May

High Flats Group, Birnies Court, 7pm -9pm

30th May

Region 5 Network AGM and Members' meeting,
Hilton Grosvenor Hotel, Haymarket

19th June

Federation Annual General Meeting, vtbc

20th-21st June

Tenants Information Service conference, Clyde-
bank.

Contact TIS on 0141 248 1242 for more details

24th June

Repairs Group, Norton Park,
Albion Road, 7pm – 9pm

Obituaries

The Federation has been saddened to learn of the deaths of three stalwart tenant activists in recent weeks.

Isobel (Izzy) Duncan was a longstanding tenant in Cables Wynd House and chaired the local tenants' association. She worked hard for her community, and local councillor Gordon Munro pays tribute to her on page 4. We send our condolences to her family.

Frances Nelson was chairman and one of the founding members of Dundee Federation of Tenants Associations. She was known to many of Edinburgh's tenant activists and will be greatly

missed by tenants not only in Dundee but across Scotland.

Alan Walter was one of the founders and leading lights within Defend Council Housing. He made an enormous and significant contribution to defending council housing and ensuring its future.

Izzy, Frances and Alan will be greatly missed. We must all continue our efforts to continue the good work to help tenants, to which they each dedicated so much energy and passion.



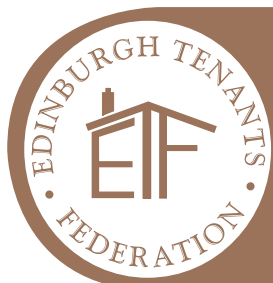
Copy Deadline

Tenants Voice is usually published four times a year and is distributed to over 3500 tenants, residents, decision-makers and other interested individuals throughout Edinburgh. We always welcome contributions from our readers, though we stress that material included in Tenants Voice does not always represent the opinions of Edinburgh Tenants Federation. Articles and photos etc for inclusion in the next issue of Tenants Voice should be sent to the Federation office by 15 May 2009.

Something to think about

“Oh wad some power the giftie gie us
To see oursel's as others see us!
It wad frae monie a blunder free us,
And foolish notion”

Robert Burns (1759 – 1796)
To a Louse



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Tel: 0131 475 2509 Email: info@edinburghtenants.org.uk

Print and Design by Graphic Impressions, Unit 27/2 Hardengreen Industrial Estate, Eskbank, Dalkeith EH22 3NX
Tel: 0131 654 0521 Fax: 0131 454 0301 Email: graphicimpressions@btconnect.com

The views expressed in this newsletter are not necessarily those of ETF.