

Swindon Tenants Campaign Group

Newsletter March 2012

c/o 5A David Stoddart Gardens, Swindon SN2 1HS

Email stcg@btinternet.com Ring 07786394593 Website <http://keepourcouncilhomes.wordpress.com>

After the 'Swindon Housing Vote' – tenants need to get organised

Swindon tenants overwhelmingly rejected the 'advice' of the Council that 'transfer' of our homes to a Housing Association was in our best interests. **Swindon Tenants Campaign Group** (STCG) would like to thank all those tenants who helped with our campaign. Many more tenants did their bit in arguing against 'transfer' in the thousands of discussions that took place all over the town. Swindon tenants showed grit and determination in refusing to give in to the Council's relentless propaganda campaign to convince us that we should vote Yes.

STCG was set up to campaign for a No vote in the ballot. The big victory shows the potential of tenants' organisation, so we have decided to continue with STCG as an organisation which campaigns for the interests of tenants on an ongoing basis.

Tenants need to get organised

In order to fight for our interests we believe that Swindon tenants need to get organised. We want you to join STCG, to get involved, and to be our eyes and ears on the ground. What may appear to be our personal experience with the Council may be something which other tenants experience, and may be a fault with the way the Council manages the stock and carries out the work. Together we can get a clearer picture of what's happening on all the estates across the town, and campaign together for an improved service.

Why not become a member? Its just £2 if you are unwaged, £5 waged. Send a cheque to **STCG c/o 37 Denholme Rd, Swindon SN3 2DN**.

We'll be grateful if you can make a small donation. You can also join our email list – just drop us an email and we will keep you informed about what's

going on. Have your say on what you think we should campaign for together.

Quality Housing

Locally, STCG will campaign for high quality housing and a good standard of repair and maintenance. We would like to know what you think about the standard of service that the Council provides and what ideas you might have for improving it. We are doing a **tenants questionnaire** to find out what you think. If you haven't already got one, you can download it from our website (see above).

National housing policy

What can be done locally, of course, depends on national housing policy. The 'self-financing' system starts in April. Although we have to take on an extra £139.6 million in debt the Council can keep all the revenue it raises from rent, so it is expected that they will have around £3 million a year more than under the current system. However, the government has imposed on Swindon a borrowing level of around £21 million more than the debt. We need to campaign for the right to borrow more from the government's Public Works Loan Board to carry out more work.

We need to campaign for a change in national housing policy, as well. The coalition government has cut investment in housing and is failing to address the 'social rent' shortage. They are continuing to push our rents up towards the higher levels of Housing Associations with big annual increases. The latest rent increase is a massive 7.89%, well above inflation. They are treating Council housing as a 'tenure of last resort' good enough only for social 'failures', a 'safety net'. The

government is stigmatising tenants by saying that if you earn 'too much' at work then you shouldn't live in a Council house; proposing to penalise you if you have empty rooms in your house by cutting your housing benefit.

To make matters worse the government is proposing to increase the discount under Right to Buy (RTB), to try and increase the number of Council house sales. Even though the government is talking about replacing each one sold, there is grave doubt that Councils will have sufficient money to build new homes on a one for one basis. But even if they did that would still leave the numbers on the waiting list at their highest ever levels. That's why STCG believes that we should campaign for an end to RTB which will simply increase the housing shortage.

Need for new Council homes

Swindon Council has just produced the draft of a Strategic Housing Management Assessment which looks at the situation in the town. (see

<http://keepourcouncilhomes.wordpress.com/2012/02/27/swindon-housing-crisis/>)

Unfortunately it doesn't mention the question of new Council house building. That may be because the coalition government is not planning on providing any funding for new Council house building. However, without it the housing crisis cannot be tackled.

The previous government eventually gave back to Councils the right to build new Council homes. Swindon built a small number last year – 13 on Park North. But, of course, the right to build is no use unless Councils have the money to build new ones on a much larger scale.

Nationally 1.8 million households or 4.5 million people are on the housing waiting list. In Swindon there are 12,096 individuals/families on the list. Of these 5,512 individuals/families are in Band A ("urgent need") and Band B ("in need"). There are 959 on the transfer list in Bands A and B.

The crisis is also reflected in the difficulties of people who might buy a house or flat. The average person requires 6.4 times their salary. Even if there is another earner in the household the average is still 5 times.

The only way that rising numbers on the waiting list can be halted and cut is if there is a return to large scale Council house building. STCG will campaign for the new housing we need.

Does Capita work for the Council or is it vice versa?

So where was the consultation? It's our understanding that Capita decided to close their cash desk without consulting Swindon Borough Council, never mind the service users. That raises a number of thorny questions.

Does SBC work for Capita or is it vice versa? Was the Council not angry that Capita would take such a unilateral decision? Is there nothing in their contract that obliges them to consult over any changes to the service that Capita provides to Swindon residents on behalf of SBC?

It's our money (the Council tax payers of Swindon) which is handed over to Capita by SBC. Doesn't Capita feel any obligation to consult with the people who use the service? Or are we just there so that Capita can make a profit out of us? And why has SBC allowed them to get away with it?

"Bedroom Tax" for housing benefit

The government is introducing changes to housing benefit for 'social tenants'. Dubbed the bedroom tax, it will **penalise tenants of working age**, who are deemed to have 'too many bedrooms'. Instead of tackling the housing crisis by building new Council homes the government is trying to drive tenants into smaller homes. Of course, the government has been careful that this won't apply to retired people, because they know there would be an outcry against it. But why should it apply to somebody who is under retirement age?

In reality, as Councils around the country have indicated, even if you could move tenants around like pawns, there are insufficient small homes available anyway.

House owners are a different matter, of course. The most empty bedrooms are in privately owned homes, but that doesn't matter does it?

We do not just live in bricks and mortar. These are our homes. Our families have grown up in them, we have lived our lives in them. If older tenants choose to move that's one thing. The Council has in the past offered financial assistance to cover the cost of moving to people who give up a 'family home'. But driving people out by cutting their benefit is scandalous. Councils are concerned that it will lead to increased rent arrears if benefits are cut.