

HACKNEY INDEPENDENT

NEWSLETTER OF HACKNEY INDEPENDENT WORKING CLASS ASSOCIATION. SPRING 2001

Everything Must Go! Council puts Hackney up for sale

Hackney Council are in the middle of making millions of pounds worth of cuts. They say that they have to do this because they were overspending, but have you noticed any "overspending" round here? They can still afford to pay Council boss Max Caller £3,000 a week and pay all the councillors' expenses, but our essential services are on the line. A number of people are saying that some of the money must have ended up in someone's back pocket – where else has it gone? And how come no councillor has resigned or been surcharged, and no top officer has been sacked over the mess that they have got us in?

Now Hackney Council have drawn up a list of all council property with the aim of attracting bids from developers. This could mean parks, schools and youth clubs. Everything is up for sale - nothing is safe. The Council will target this area because they know they can get more money for land or buildings close to the City than out in Hackney Wick or Stamford Hill.

At the same time as planning a massive round of cuts, the Council are putting up our rents by £2.08 a week. Considering that they are not doing any repairs or giving transfers, exactly what services are they going to cut? And why should we pay more for less?

A Level Playing Field ?

Tenant Convention vice-chair Dave Mackey told the Hackney Independent "Increases can't be justified because Hackney Council is not carrying out the level of services required by law currently. This is proven by the amount of money paid out by the Council when they are taken to court for disrepair. Why should we get such a poor level of service in Hackney and be asked to pay so much for it, when tenants in Kensington & Chelsea are getting a better level of service and are paying much lower rent? Aren't the tenants of Hackney entitled to a level playing field?"

When they came round asking for your vote last time, how many councillors said that they would be bringing in these sort of cuts? None of them did, and they have no mandate or support to do so. More than that, these services don't belong to the councillors – they are ours. We have paid for them with our rents and council tax several times over and no councillor has the right to sell them off.

We should never let Labour get back in. The Labour government has proved no better at funding Hackney than the Tories. Labour now runs Hackney Council in an alliance with the Tories and it is these parties that are bringing in the cuts. The Hackney Labour Party is now a middle class party with no interest in representing the working class.

Double Standards

And who do the Lib Dems think they're kidding ? They are very good at telling you what you want to hear when they are in opposition, but they helped get the Council into the mess when they ran the Borough with the Tories. In neighbouring Islington the Lib Dems took over the Council a year ago and immediately pushed through even more cuts than Labour were planning. In Hackney they called for ITNet to be sacked but in Islington they are keeping them and are even paying them more in an attempt to bail them out over the mess they've got themselves into. While the Lib Dems oppose the closure of Hoxton's Burbage School, in Islington they force the closure of the popular Angel Primary School to cash in on its land value.

There is no point in looking to any of the political parties on Hackney Council. What have any of them done for your estate? You are about to see them coming round asking for your vote in the General Election. But whoever gets in, all they want to do is represent the middle class.

We can't expect anyone to stand up for us. It's our estates and community that are most affected. Instead we need to decide what which essential services we cannot lose, draw a line in the sand and plan what steps we will take to defend them.

Who will challenge Hackney Council's plans for this area? Who will stop the housing associations taking over our estates? Who will stop the area being over-run with yuppie apartments and trendy bars? Who will stand us for the interests of Hackney's working class majority?

The answer can only be Hackney's working class majority itself. And the IWCA is proud to be part of that majority and working solely for immediate working class interests. Don't let Hackney Council win.

This is a working class area – and we should decide how it is run.



Above: Peabody Flats overlook Fellows Court. An example of the social division in Hackney. Peabody flats cost upwards of £200 pw while tenants on Fellows Court wait months for simple repairs

Pushing Us Out - the social cleansing of Shoreditch

Gentrification is the name of a process in which whole areas are "improved" by redesigning housing, changing the social mix and bringing in new businesses. In Shoreditch, to put it bluntly, this has meant planning to demolish council housing, clearing out working class people to replace them with "upwardly mobile" city workers and converting pubs into bars where few locals are employed and beer costs you double what it used to.

Because of the value of the land that our homes are on we are sitting on a gold mine, but it's unlikely that we will see any benefits. As the City expands to fill more space, we are pushed out. Hackney Council and the New Deal officers have dreamed up schemes like bringing in private renting in council blocks like Charles Gardner and Aske House right through to the plans to demolish 822 council homes that were voted down at a recent New Deal meeting; we are being attacked on all fronts. And if that's not enough, around us spring up reminders of what we are not entitled to: flash new Peabody flats on Cremer Street (starting rent £150 a week) and even crazy New Deal plans to build loft apartments on top of some of our blocks.

Who is protecting the interests of the working class majority in the area ? Is it the Labour, Tory or Lib Dem councillors ? Is it the developers set to make a killing on prime sites ? The working class majority is voiceless and without representation and this is why the IWCA exists. We believe that working class people can make a difference.

STOPPEDYA!

One example of what we can do is the recent New Deal meeting where New Deal officers put forward plans to demolish 822 council homes. With very little notice, but a lot of determination, tenants from most of the affected blocks got together to collect petitions from other tenants and organise a show of strength. In the end over 100 people turned out. Seeing the size of the protest, the proposals were withdrawn. Whatever the New Deal's glossy magazine says, these proposals were not a "rumour" or a "lie", they were the New Deal's "preferred option". If you want to see a copy of the New Deal's own report phone the IWCA and we'll send you a copy.



Hackney Council and a pile of rubbish - but which is which ?

In this edition: Harwood Court tenants fight back • Stamping out anti-social crime • Background to the Financial Crisis in Hackney
• ITNet and the benefits scandal • Mobile phone masts

Knocking your block down ?

Although the New Deal were forced to call off plans for knocking down 822 homes in the area, they are still committed to knocking down individual blocks if they can persuade the tenants to let them do it. Watch out for New Deal staff coming round making you promises. You may have been wanting to get out of your block for years - but remember all they are offering is being moved to another run down block, or a move to a high rent housing association home. If you hear any rumours of the New Deal targeting your block, phone the IWCA on 07000 752752. We will help you to organise to stop them, and to campaign to get improvements carried out to your block.

HACKNEY IWCA Box 48, 136 Kingsland High Street, London E8 2NS tel:07000 752 752

The Hackney Independent is delivered free to 15,000 homes in Hoxton, Haggerston & De Beauvoir

HARWOOD COURT

the block that fought back

Tenants in one of Shoreditch's most neglected blocks have shown what can be achieved when people work together to stand up for their interests. Hackney Council and the New Deal, until recently, believed that the tenants wanted Harwood Court knocked down. Until, that is, somebody actually asked the tenants.

The IWCA has been active in Harwood Court since September 2000, working alongside tenants and asking them what they want for the block, through a series of canvassing sessions. At every stage, the tenants have been consulted and involved and as in most blocks the tenants all agree what the main problems are - security, repairs and cleaning. Because a lot of the low rise blocks in the area have security doors, Harwood Court is an obvious target for a number of anti-social elements and the tenants have suffered from more drug dealing, muggings and intimidation than most blocks. Evidence of vandalism and hard drug use is obvious to see and the day before one of our tenants' meetings, a young girl was the victim of a serious sexual assault in broad daylight on the stairs. On top of this, many of the flats didn't have central heating and the wind whistles in through dodgy windows.

Below: Harwood Court on Colville Estate. Neglected for years, tenants have fought back and demanded action



IWCA members worked with several tenants to collect signatures calling for entry phones to be installed and for a full refurbishment of the block to be carried out, holding meetings in the lobby, drawing up a manifesto of tenants' priorities and organising a delegation of tenants to put the petition to the New Deal Board, who have the money to make a difference. The fact that 90% of the flats in the block signed up to the petition and that tenants themselves went to put their case, meant that the New Deal Board agreed to support the proposals for entry phones and work is now underway to improve life in the block. Coincidentally, since the IWCA and tenants got active in the block, the council have started putting cen-

tral heating into all flats, which is a start. But pressure needs to be kept up to make sure that entry phones are installed and the longer term goals - like refurbishment - aren't forgotten like all the previous promises.

There's more to be done and we're not complacent that change will happen overnight, but as long-term tenant June Cleevely said "Morale in the block was very low and it was good to see the IWCA come in and take some interest. This encouraged people to feel that they could change things". The success of the Harwood Court tenants shows what can be achieved when community politics addresses the real issues.



Above: IWCA canvasser in action. Tenants took a lead role in getting results

KNOCKING IT ON THE HEAD

stamping out anti-social behaviour

In the last issue of Hackney Independent we ran an article on anti-social behaviour on our estates. Since then we have discussed the issue with tenants across the South of Hackney. IWCA activists have been canvassing opinions in blocks like Sara Lane Court, Rosalind and Cordelia Houses and Harwood Court to find out what tenants think can be done about the anti-social elements who ruin lives. Since our last newsletter events have come to a head on the Pembury Estate, with tenants taking on their new private landlord in meetings and through the Gazette's letters page. The Gazette ran a front page article headed "Our drug hell" and sub-titled "is this Britain's worst estate?" The report went on to list the muggings, drug deals, vandalism and break-ins that are now common on the Pembury. More recently, tenants in one Shoreditch tower block have told us of a brutal mugging, a murder, and the rape of a girl in the lobby of the block, *in broad daylight*. We all know that these are not isolated problems; tenants all over the borough have horror stories of their own.

So what can be done about it? It seems clear that the police don't want to know unless the middle classes are affected, and the council and housing associations are reluctant to spend any money on improved security in problem blocks. One example of what can be achieved is at Sara Lane Court where tenants put sustained pressure on Pinnacle to get entry phones installed. The situation has now improved, with less overt drug use on the stairwells. Would Pinnacle have done anything about it if tenants hadn't taken the initiative? We doubt it.

In other parts of the country working class activists have put forward their own solutions. In Birmingham, muggings had reached epidemic proportions on one estate and tenants pointed out that the muggers were using poorly lit rat-runs on the estate to escape, so - despite threats from their own council - they bricked up the alleyways themselves. In Oxford, the community organised on another estate to isolate one problem family and make it clear to them their behaviour would not be tolerated. These are **practical** answers to the problem.

It is obvious that the police and the Council are not solving the problem. We believe that working class communities can lead the way by organising together and taking shared responsibility for our own problems. If tenants identify that anti-social behaviour is the fault of other tenants on the same estate or block then we as a community might have to seriously look at acting ourselves - be this a campaign of *naming and shaming* local teenagers who are smashing up what few facilities there are on an estate, or taking a more robust stand against tenants who are using their flats to deal hard drugs and attracting all sorts of nutters. The first step could be circulating leaflets to all tenants making it clear that everyone has a responsibility to treat neighbours with respect and to take responsibility for whoever they let into the block.

Part of the problem, especially for older people, is the atmosphere of fear that can be created by small groups of young people. Many older people are too scared to go out onto even their own landings in many blocks, because they are afraid they will be attacked or robbed. It's clear that the lack of youth facilities is one reason kids are hanging around and it doesn't take a genius to know that if our young people had some constructive alternatives to fill their time, the problems would be greatly reduced, but this is no excuse for threatening and destructive behaviour. One possibility which the IWCA has discussed with tenants on some estates is to organise a "presence" in problem areas during certain times; obviously this has to be carefully discussed with tenants and the impetus - and part of the team in the problem area - has to come from the tenants themselves. Let's be clear about this. The IWCA has no magic wand to wave; we *all* have to take responsibility for what happens on our estates. If we are going to make our slogan **working class rule in working class areas** a reality then taking control of our own estates - and out of the hands of drug dealers and vandals - is the first step. **The IWCA has held community meetings and discussions - now it's time to act.**

MOBILE PHONE MASTS - get the message ?

Mobile phone masts have been springing up all over this area, without any consultation. Most of these masts are being placed on top of council blocks but do the tenants get asked if they want them? Not likely. And do the tenants see any of the cash (up to £7000 per mast) that the phone companies pay to put them there? You must be joking.

Research into the health risks of phone masts has suggested that the microwaves given off can be harmful, especially to young children, yet many of these masts (like the one on Laburnum Street) overlook primary schools. The Stewart Inquiry, set up by the government, recommended that phone masts are not put up near schools.

But health is not the only issue at stake. If these masts started springing up on the roofs of yuppie loft apartments we wouldn't hear the end of it, but stick them on our estates and the Council and the mobile phone companies expect to get away without any fuss. **The whole issue is one of accountability and control in our own areas.**

IWCA co-ordinator Peter Sutton said "We're not against mobile phones - I've got one myself. What we're against is the phone masts being stuck up on or near estates and our kids' schools, when we don't even know about the health risks. If they are safe why don't we put one up on the town hall?"

Residents of Hawksley Court have shown what can be done when local people get together to oppose the installation of masts; they blockaded workmen and prevented any work being done. Hackney Council, One2One, Vodafone - do you get the message?

In neighbouring Islington, the IWCA campaign to ban the installation of all new phone masts has been a success, forcing a u-turn in policy from the council. The same should happen here - no new masts. And until the health risks of existing masts have been properly researched, tenants should be consulted about removing existing ones.

For an info pack on phone masts call 07000 752 752

News Update+++News Update+++News Update++

No Repair Cuts - No Rent Rises

Over 40 tenants activists attended a meeting at Fellows Court on 26th February in reaction to plans by Hackney Council to increase Rents and Council Tax while cutting back on services such as repairs.

The meeting was organised by Hoxton & Haggerston Fightback (which includes IWCA members) to enable Tenants' Associations to come together to discuss proposals for a public enquiry into the council's financial incompetence and their insistence that it should be Hackney's working class who once again bail them out.

A Housing Shop Steward from UNISON identified cuts that could be made, namely Max Caller's salary and those of his 9 (count 'em) assistant directors, and stressed the importance of involving local communities in the opposition to the cuts. Committee members of the 7 TAs present voiced their support and challenged the idea of raising rents while cutting services.

A motion proposing a rent freeze (ie that tenants should withhold the rent increase) was put and agreed in principle. TAs will discuss the proposals and report back on 12 March to discuss what can be done. We support the call for a public enquiry and a rent freeze. If there is widespread agreement for it on our estates we will be involved in the campaign. Those interested are urged to contact their TAs, or the IWCA.

'STRANGE FRUIT'

Food Co-op

in association with Shoreditch New Deal

Fresh fruit and vegetables at low prices every Thursday 3-30pm to 5-30pm.

Provost Estate Community Hall, Murray Grove, N1.

Membership is free if you live in the New Deal area and if you have a SHOX Card. If you don't have a card then bring proof of name and address and we can issue a card on the day. Please bring your own carrier bags if possible (we charge 2p per bag).

Volunteers needed!

To place an ad in the next Hackney Independent, give us a bell on 07000 752 752. We go free to 15,000 homes in Shoreditch, Haggerston and De Beauvoir.

WORKING CLASS RULE IN WORKING CLASS AREAS

an interview with Peter Sutton of the IWCA

Why does the name Independent Working Class Association mean?

Firstly we are independent of all political parties. Whereas all the parties at the Town Hall get into bed with each other from time to time we have pledged that we will never form any alliance with Labour, Lib Dem, Tory or Green parties. And secondly we are working class. The middle class have already got four parties in the Town Hall to represent them. We need our own organisation because the working class have got different and separate priorities and interests from the middle class. And the term working class covers the majority of people in this area. People are always trying to split us between young and old, black and white, tenant and leaseholder. The IWCA aims to involve and represent the working class majority in Hackney.

Why do you think that less and less people vote?

The middle class are still voting – that's because the big 4 parties in Hackney are representing their interests. In the by-election in Hackney Wick last year only 18% voted – so 82% thought they had nothing to gain from any of the parties. They are right. The big 4 parties aren't offering the working class anything. A lot of people under the age of 30 have never voted, and a lot of older people have given up.

What do you think of the Shoreditch New Deal?

I think we were right to come out very strong at the beginning and brand it a "raw deal." Because all the vested interests – the Council, the housing associations, the consultants, the big political parties were all saying it was brilliant, it was important to say "hold on a minute, lets have a look at what it's really about." Remember they have tried pushing privatisation at Shoreditch before and got knocked back.

The New Deal was a clever attempt to suck in all the tenant leaders and persuade them that our housing should be sold off. It nearly worked. They have persuaded some of the New Deal Board, but luckily there have been some good people in there who couldn't be bought off, and we have helped let people across the area know what is going on. As we said in an article that was published in a national magazine "if the New Deal gives up on privatising our housing and concentrates on helping people find jobs, then we'll stop criticising."

But isn't the New Deal led by the community?

No. 82% of people in Shoreditch are council or housing association tenants. Why aren't 82% of the Board tenants? At least give us a majority. And the best tenant and leaseholder representatives are always fighting against the pro-privatisation agenda being pushed by the New Deal staff and their consultants.

I think that the row over New Deal Director Michael Pyner's salary was a good example. We announced that he was paid a thousand pounds a week. He denied it, but refused to say how much he was paid. People were getting up at meetings and asking him how much he was paid and he wouldn't tell them. If it was community-led, why can't the community know where our money is going? By the way, since he started Michael Pyner has been paid over a hundred thousand pounds, and that's without his perks and pension.

There have been good things. A lot of little improvements have been done here and there. The New Deal Director is only funding these things because he thinks it will soften us up and make us more willing to listen to his arguments for privatisation – but it hasn't worked. We've taken their money and still said we're not having our homes knocked down or sold off.

I know people outside the New Deal area are probably thinking this has nothing to do with them, but we think that whatever they get away with in Shoreditch, they will try on De Beauvoir or in Haggerston next.

What's the problem with regenerating this area?

There's no problem with regeneration - if it's on terms favourable to local people. But that's not on offer - yet. No-one wanted to know about Hoxton for years. Now you blink and there's a new bar or restaurant. I wouldn't mind so much if they employed local people – at least we'd get something out of it. But the prices they charge and the type of place they are make it clear – locals not wanted. You can see crowds of rich young people swarming in from Old Street station. In turn they bring more drugs into the area, and they attract more muggers. The muggers know that there is more money in the area, but they end up mugging

our own old people as they are easier targets. We've also got thirteen strip bars in or within five minutes walk of this area. There's no other area like it in London. These are mainly used by City workers, and now there's a problem of them coming out drunk and looking for prostitutes. There's a long standing problem in Commercial Street, but it's on the increase in Shoreditch. We know of a number of cases of local women being hassled by these City workers. One of the best TA chairs in Shoreditch told an IWCA meeting that if the City of London wants these strip bars they should have them down there. The IWCA will oppose any new strip bars coming, and will look to oppose the licenses of the existing ones being renewed in future.



Peter Sutton of the IWCA

Why does the IWCA spend so much time canvassing our estates?

There was a time when you could put a leaflet out and get a hall full of people. Those days have gone. That's why we go to where people are, and ask them about the problems in their block. No-one else does it. I call our councillors the "Olympic councillors."-like the Olympics they only come round every four years! That's when they ask you for your vote and then disappear. In fact now they don't even bother to ask for your vote, they just take it for granted that they'll get enough votes to scrape back in. We're only going to build a genuine working class organisation by going to where people live, ask what their problems are, and involve them in finding our own solutions. If we haven't knocked on your door, it's only because we aren't big enough yet. But give us a ring, and come round your block with us. Lets get something started and start to change things for the better.

The IWCA is considering standing in council elections. What would you offer that would be different to the 4 parties on the council?

We would only be going into the Town Hall to fight for the immediate interests of the working class majority in this area. We wouldn't look to do deals with the middle class parties, or to waste our time being out-voted. We'd spend our time in the community. Whoever stands has to be held accountable – both to the organisation they represent and to the community. Our councillors would pledge to hold an open meeting in their ward every six months to say what they have been doing and hear what people have to say. They would state their programme before the election and pledge that if they go against the programme, or fail to hold the open meetings then they would resign.

The IWCA use the slogan "Working class rule in working class areas". What do you mean by this?

We are saying that this is a working class area and that we should be in control of what happens here. If you look at the issues we're covering in this newsletter – from the council cutting our services to the New Deal plans to knock our homes down, from the phone companies putting their masts on our estates to the anti-social elements that are making our lives a misery you can see that we are not in control yet.

Our aim is that we the working class majority should decide what happens on our own estates. We should be able to deal with the anti-social elements, stop the phone masts going up and force the council to spend our rent money on improving our estates. There's no point in planning to take over the Town Hall, the government or the World, we need to be in control of what happens in our own area. Maybe later we can try and take on the Town Hall, but lets have a few wins locally first and build our confidence up. The working class are used to losing. Lets turn that around and make Hackney Council, the housing associations and the developers the ones that are used to losing.

What can people do if they want to help?

Everyone can do something to help - even just phoning information through to our answerphone is useful. How much help you can give is up to you – but if you can help deliver newsletters, take a petition round your block or even make the tea at meetings there is a part you can play. And by attending our meetings you can help make decisions on what issues we take up and how we campaign on them.

Bailiffs, the law and you

What to do when the bailiffs come knocking

We have had some reports about what the council's bailiffs have been up to when people get behind with their council tax. A lot of people are behind with their council tax through no fault of their own. This could be through being messed about by ITNet, having lost your job through sickness, or just being on a low wage and having to prioritise putting food on the table.

If you are behind with your council tax, the council may try to send the bailiffs in. Here are some important things to remember if the bailiffs knock on your door:

1. They will try to lie to you. They may say that they will come back with the police to intimidate you. They may say that if you let them in they will come to an agreement with you if you let them in. They may threaten to break down your door. Whatever you do, DO NOT LET THEM IN.
2. They have no right to enter your home. They cannot get a court order to let them in and the police will not help them to break in.
3. Once you have let them in on one occasion, they have the right to break back in and to seize your property.

If the council's bailiffs have tried any of these bully-boy tactics on you, then please get in touch with the IWCA on 07000 752 752. We are putting together a report on the bailiffs in a campaign to get the council to call them off.

But it's not just the bailiffs that we've got a problem with. The council is breaking its legal duties all the time – whether in not carrying out repairs, or in not consulting. We are looking to put together a team of people who can begin to use the law to force the council to carry out its responsibilities. This is not because we have faith that the courts will automatically back us, but because we think that there will be times when we can use the law for our benefit. This could be anything from forcing the council to repair individual flats and pay compensation to tenants through to stopping rent rises or other changes when there has not been the legal consultation carried out.

If you know a bit about the law or know your rights, or can just spare a bit of time to do some research then please phone the IWCA number (07000 752 752) and lets make the council fulfil its responsibilities to us.

News In Brief

ITNet slammed again

Is ITNet completely useless? Many of those on benefits in Hackney would already say so, but it appears the firm's infamy and incompetence is spreading. Enfield Council recently fined the firm the equivalent of £150,000 after its services failed to come up to scratch. While you've got to feel sorry for Enfield for having to put up with the same we've been through, it does beg the question, where were Hackney Council's penalty clauses and why can't ITNet be made to pay up for the mess they've created?

Interesting fact: in 1999 Bridget Blow, a director of ITNet received £289,000 in salary and benefits.

New Deal Board Stitchup?

The elections for Shoreditch New Deal Board early this year produced few surprises. Clayeon Mackenzie, a determined opponent of estate sell-offs, narrowly failed to win the position of chair but it was the way he failed to win that's interesting. An ex-member of the Board, known to be pro sell-offs, who had resigned, sold up her Georgian townhouse and moved to the West Country was allowed to vote and the person elected to replace her wasn't. This vote could have made all the difference, but somehow we suspect they knew this all along...

Worst Housing Crisis in Years

"Booming house prices, the right to buy and estate revamps are behind the council's desperate shortage of housing, which is the worst for 10 years. All 380 hostel places in the borough are full and Hackney Council says the housing crisis has not been this bad for a decade." Not the IWCA but the Hackney Gazette reporting in a February edition on the situation affecting the borough. As we point out on the cover, estate sell-offs and the introduction of private renting in council blocks are putting the squeeze on the area's resources. Good to see someone else has noticed.

For regular news updates check the Hackney IWCA website at www.hackneyiwca.fsnet.co.uk

How Did We Get Into This Mess?

IWCA Co-ordinator Peter Sutton spoke to Dave Mackey, Vice Chair of Hackney Tenants' Convention, and asked his views on the financial crisis in Hackney Council.

What is the position with the cuts and the budget ?

It's a situation that cannot be resolved without a large input of money from the Government. It needs a basic reinstatement of some of the subsidies that the Government has taken away from us. In the last six years they have slashed £108 million and each year the Council has to repay £65 million in loans to the banks. If the Government cancelled this debt like they have done to the third world countries then we'd be in a much better position.

The Council's accounting is so bad that they can't even put a proper figure on their debt. Nine months ago they said it was £10 million, which crept up to £15 million, then £20 million. I challenged the Labour Leader, Jules Pipe on this figure – I said the debt was nearer £40 million and he agreed. When he agreed to this figure I immediately went up to £70 million. Now the Council are admitting to £76 million pounds worth of debt. I think the figure must be nearer £150 million.

What are the councillors doing?

The Government has told Hackney Council to put its house in order under the direction of Managing Director, Max Caller. He in turn took over from where Tony Elliston left off – to dictate to the councillors, because they are, and always have been, incapable of running the Council. I can see it now. Max calls the councillors together and tells them "unless you do as I say, you will be surcharged." This would mean they would lose their property and any assets they might have.

That is why all these councillors from all parties are so willing to agree to any of Max's proposals to make cuts to staff, salaries and their terms and conditions. This will obviously result in cuts to services. Whilst Max proposes to increase the cost of these services, to be paid for by the residents of Hackney; the residents and service providers are yet again expected to bear the cost.

How can they get away with it?

The perpetrators of this mess are the councillors and senior officers. The councillors should be surcharged. The senior officers who seriously ill-advised the councillors when decisions were being made should be sacked. Until this Council is brought down, we will be expected to keep bailing them out and bearing the cost. It's time to tell them "the party's over". As the old song goes "It's time to call it a day. So lets burst their pretty balloon, and hope they all go away." The Audit Commission should act now.

How can they make any more cuts?

It's impossible to make any more cuts, as they're not meeting their legal duties now. To prove that point, when I questioned the Director of Housing, Steve Tucker, about what repairs they actually do, he referred me to the Tenants' Handbook. This says that they will only meet their legal obligations and do any other work ordered by the court.

How did the Council get into this mess?

Partly through Government subsidies being withdrawn, as this Government seems to have no social conscience. Partly through officers ill-advising councillors when decisions were being taken. And partly through councillors who are not qualified to make decisions because they do not understand the issues and haven't got the skills to question the officers.

The Council has been warned by the District Auditor since 1996 that this problem was coming. The District

Auditor made it clear that councillors had to take charge and not let officers run the Council. Instead they allowed (former Chief Executive) Tony Elliston and now Max Caller to dictate to them.

How do they keep losing so much money?

Hackney Council was even able to lose money on Parking Enforcement! How can you not make a profit on that? They decided to privatise rubbish collection because they were paying so much more for it than any other Borough. This resulted in a company called Service team winning the contract. Another company called Cleanaway who were unsuccessful then went ahead and bought Service Team – just two months into their contract. And after all this the Council are now paying £2 million a year more for rubbish collection – when the whole idea was to save money! And everyone knows about the mess they got into when they privatised the housing benefits service.

The Council are required by law under Best Value Guidelines to consult on these changes. The claim that with the rubbish service they consulted the Street Leaders Group. But the Council had already scrapped the Street Leaders' Group to save money! That's Hackney Council's consultation.

But the council don't consult tenants

Under the Government's Best Value guidelines, it clearly states that there should be full consultation in conjunction with tenant participation. The tenant leaders of this Borough are community-spirited volunteers who are giving up their time for free to attend meetings, while council officers are paying lip service to consultation, when they have often already made their decisions before the meeting. The necessary paperwork is not provided until the date of the consultation and we're not given enough time to read it before the deadline for comments. This happened with both the rent survey and the tenant satisfaction surveys. We got them both the day before they were due back.

What should happen now?

It's about time Hackney Council was accountable and opened up their books for public inspection. The District Auditor has been privy to all this information for years – so what has been done to prevent the financial crisis that Hackney Council is in now? It's no wonder we find ourselves in this mess, when we find we have another first – the Labour/Tory partnership that now runs the Council. Not that the Lib Dems are any better. They are just making protests about the cuts knowing that it won't make any difference to the outcome. They are just using it as a cheap way to impress the electorate in order to score some points and win votes. It's up to us to tell all these councillors that we elected them to represent our best interests and they have failed miserably to do this. If they have any hint of decency they should resign now.



Above: Is this the future of council housing if the council continues with its plans ?

ITNet sacked

so where's our benefits ?

by Carl Taylor



The IWCA has been running benefits advice surgeries mainly for people affected by the ITNet fiasco. Trained advice workers have dealt with a range of problems. Along with our advice surgeries we've been involved in the campaign group Whose Benefit ? set up by victims of the ITNet scandal. Even though ITNet have finally been sacked by Hackney Council, things look like they will get worse before they get any better. ITNet have made massive profits at the expense of our misery and it has taken the council two years to sit up and take notice of what people on benefits have been going through - not surprising when you consider that the middle class councillors from all parties know nothing about life at the sharp end.

If you are having problems with threatening letters, delays in payments etc. Carl Taylor offers some tips:

- Read the form carefully and provide everything asked of you.
- The council will want to see original documents (not copies) - but beware of posting them. Try to take them into the office yourself (or ask a friend or neighbour) and always get a receipt detailing everything you have handed in.
- If you do not have all the information to hand, put your claim in anyway. You are in danger of losing benefit if you delay sending the form. You can provide the rest when you have it, but don't ignore council letters asking for information. They may withdraw your claim and you will have to start again.
- If you have claimed through the Benefit Agency (DSS), don't wait for the council to send you one of their claim forms. Collect one from the office or your local housing office.
- Keep a record of all contact with the benefit office: keep a diary of phone calls and visits, and keep copies of all correspondence.
- Keep a note of the names of everyone you speak to.
- Don't forget to put the date and your reference number on all letters to the office.
- Copy your letters to the benefit office to your local housing officer so they know you are pursuing a claim.
- If you have co-operated all you can but the delays are causing high rent or council tax arrears, write and complain to the benefit manager. If they don't reply within 14 days complain to the council's complaints service. The next step is to complain to the Local Government Ombudsman. Law centres, CAB and IWCA can help.
- If you are threatened with eviction contact the housing office and let them know you are waiting for housing benefit. Show them your receipts.
- If you are threatened with court action for non-payment of council tax, contact the council tax office to let them know you are waiting for benefit.
- Don't ignore bailiff warrants, court summonses or possession orders. Get legal advice from a law centre or CAB. The IWCA can put you in touch.

If you know anything about the law or know your rights you could also help out by getting involved in the legal group mentioned on page 2 of this edition.



Above: IWCA advice surgery on the Geffrye Estate. The next surgery is planned for April. Contact the IWCA number for more details or look out for publicity on your estate.

Join the IWCA

Hackney IWCA was set up to represent the needs of the working class majority in the borough. Since the last newsletter, the IWCA has been involved in repairs canvasses on 3 different estates, consulting tenants over dealing with anti-social behaviour and block refurbishment, running advice surgeries, opposing stock transfers and the privatisation of council housing, putting pressure on Pinnacle and the Council to deal with rubbish collection and disposing of abandoned cars. There is more to do and we are still a relatively small organisation.

If you think you would like to get involved in community politics that can make a difference, join us by filling in the slip below and send it to Box 48, 136 Kingsland High Street, E8 2LS.

Name:

Address:

Phone:

Email: