

# WELSH TENANTS UNITE FOR COUNCIL HOUSING



## NEWS FROM WASTE

Welsh tenants are uniting to press the case for council housing to be kept in the public sector. Campaigners in Wrexham, where tenants voted to stay with the local council rather than transfer to a private housing association, have now launched a Wales-wide group that will fight for direct funding for council housing.

Spokesman Maurice Jones said: *"We are in touch with tenants in Torfaen, Monmouthshire, Swansea, Rhondda Cynon Taff where a stock transfer ballot is imminent. WASTE can learn the lessons of our campaign in Wrexham, where 59% of tenants said no to the sell-off plans.*

*"We're not asking for more money from the government - we just want the same money it was willing to offer the housing associations to renovate council housing but keep it in the public sector. If the Labour-run Assembly government is not willing to do that, then we have to conclude that the sell-off plans are being driven by a hatred of the public sector rather than any practical reason."*

Campaigners from Wrexham will be meeting tenants from all over Wales at the inaugural conference of Wales Against Stock Transfer (WASTE) this summer and have been heartened by news that two of Wales's biggest councils have decided against transferring their housing stock to the private sector. Both Cardiff and Flintshire say there is no need for stock transfer in their areas and WASTE will be pressing other councils in Wales to follow suit. They say the Wrexham vote proves that stock transfer is a "dead duck" in Wales and Finance Minister Edwina Hart has to respond to tenants by coming up with an alternative.

Mr Jones, of Wrexham, added: *"The tenants have spoken and decisively said 'we want to stay in the public sector'. We believe the Assembly government has got to listen to that message and act quickly.*

*"There's only one council in Wales - Bridgend - that has opted for stock transfer so far. We know many councils don't want to go down this path so we're urging them to back our campaign, which has also got the support of all the main public-sector unions, to ensure that council housing stays in the public sector and is allowed to thrive rather than wither on the vine."*

## HART FAILURE

Campaigners against stock transfer finally got a chance to question Edwina Hart this month when Assembly ministers attended a question and answer session at NEWI Wrexham. Hart stated emphatically that she was determined that all councils must reach the Welsh Quality Housing Standard (WQHS) by 2012. She was critical of biased groups' influences on tenants and said that she would like to see truly independent tenant advisers!

This statement is made in the wake of allegations that the independent tenants' adviser in Torfaen warned anxious tenants that the 'no' vote in Wrexham has led to no repairs being carried out for their tenants.

Samantha LaRoche, a Wrexham tenant, asked Ms Hart the question *"Wrexham Council spent £1,600 per house on repairs and improvements last year, the same amount as Valleys To Coast (VTC). Yet VTC say they are now well on their way to reaching the standard, despite giving their chief executive a 91% pay rise, while Wrexham say they can't reach the standard. How is this possible?"*

Hart's response was to praise VTC for their work towards reaching the standard, whilst criticising Wrexham's lack of financial strategy. Rather than address the question on the spending angle (the fact both had spent the same per house), she instead praised VTC for all the work that they had brought into the community. A member of the audience pointed out that during 2004-2005 only one new tradesperson was employed, that without a verification process or measure of success, it was impossible to say who was or was not achieving the standard, and that, without verification, it is impossible to accurately estimate the cost of reaching the standard.

The comments were ignored by Ms Hart, who went on to describe how VTC, with the help of a local college, had just set up a training centre to bring more building skills into the community.

At the end of the meeting, WASTE spokesman Maurice Jones said *"I find it hard to believe that an investment of £1,600 per house after a 'yes' vote is good but after a 'no' vote is bad. If the WQHS is going to have any value, we must have measurable targets that can be verified. Ministers can't just assume that one group is achieving the standard and another isn't without empirical evidence.*

*"The biggest problem with achieving the standard, is the lack of skilled labour. The Welsh Consumer Council said in 2004 that is likely that, if all local authorities in Wales were to put in place business plans to achieve the WQHS, there would be insufficient labour to physically carry out the work. I suspect this is the reasoning behind the VTC training centre. This approach is likely to fail unless they can find a way to hold on to staff once they have qualified."*



Some of Wrexham's housing stock

# DECISION-MAKING AT WPJF - HAVE YOUR SAY!

Wrexham Peace and Justice Forum has been in existence since 2003. During this time we've been active in many campaigns which have been reported in this newsletter and in local papers. This has provided our supporters with an opportunity to express their individual and shared views on a wide range of issues.

To maintain this level of energy and impact, our supporters need to take part in decisions about the direction of WPJF. Recently we have discussed ways of attracting more people to contribute ideas and opinions. So, we are opening this discussion to all our supporters and readers of the newsletter.

WPJF does not have an organising committee, or officers (such as Treasurer or Secretary) or a written constitution. Anyone who supports our aims is welcome to contribute to the organisation and running of WPJF. Decisions about our events and actions are usually made at monthly Planning meetings (although occasionally, when speed is of the essence, messages are posted on our e-group), where everyone has a chance to speak and contribute to decisions, which are made by consensus. These meetings are minuted and the minutes are posted on our e-group (<http://goups.yahoo.com/group/wrexhamagainstwar>) for our supporters to read and comment on. We think this openness is one of the reasons WPJF continues to be successful and attract a range of supporters who all support our aims in many different ways.

Some of the suggestions we have already discussed are:

- Currently, Planning meetings are held at the Peace and Justice Centre, 35 Kingsmills Rd., Wrexham, at 6pm on a Wednesday. Is this the best, most convenient place and time? Could more people come if the meetings (which usually last a couple of hours):
  - Started later?
  - Were shorter, but held more frequently?
  - Were held at weekends?
- Changing the name and/or focus of the Planning Meetings – perhaps the current name of the meetings implies that they are dull and bureaucratic? They aren't; they are friendly discussions that, apart from the necessary business, are a place to chat

about Peace and Justice matters with friends and exchange news and views. So how can we emphasise the social part of the meeting? Would you like to bring food to share? Could we watch and discuss a video on a Peace subject as well as the business meeting? Could someone lead a discussion or deliver a prepared talk on a chosen topic each month?

- Could the meetings include more in-depth discussion of an issue as a central part of the meeting, and advertise that in advance? For example our May meeting, when we discussed the action we would take at the army recruitment event at Chirk (see elsewhere in this newsletter) could have been promoted beforehand as "Come along and discuss how the army targets its recruitment at children in Wales, and what we can do about it".
- Could we encourage people who can't or don't want to come to the regular meetings to contribute their opinions in other ways, perhaps via the e-group, or by letter?

So, is there something that prevents you from coming to our meetings? Can you think of ways to include more of our friends and supporters in the decisions of WPJF? Please let us know; we welcome all your opinions and comments. Please send your ideas to us at: WPJF, PO Box 661, Wrexham, LL11 1QU or by email to: [wrexhamsaw@yahoo.com](mailto:wrexhamsaw@yahoo.com).

## PLEASE HELP WPJN

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