

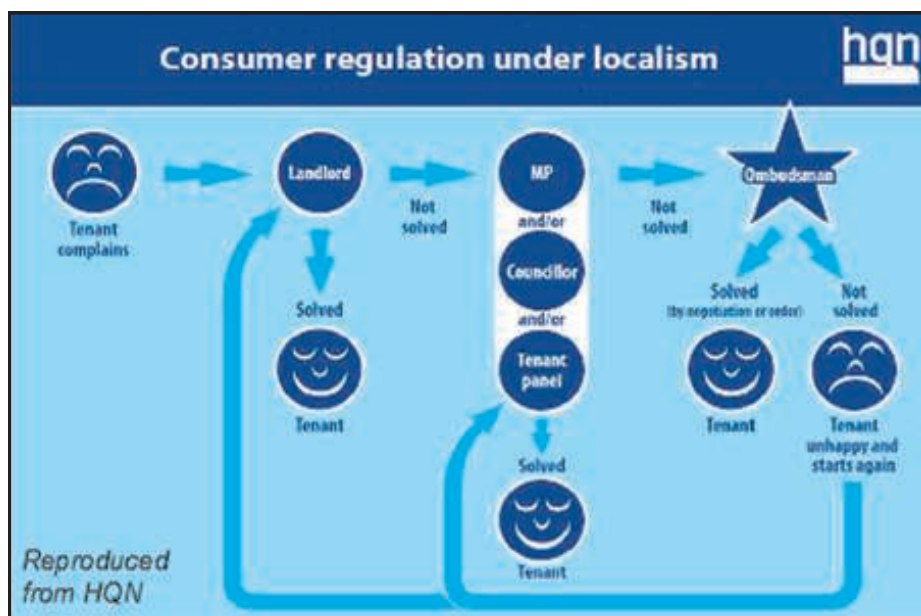
The Paper of Newcastle Tenants Federation

Tenant Scrutiny... More Power to Tenants?

The onslaught on social housing tenants shows no sign of letting up, with the coalition government's reform machine working round the clock and its victims growing by the day.

Following the axing of the Tenant Services Authority ("the tenant advocate") in last year's bonfire of Quangos, social housing tenants are now being asked to take centre stage in monitoring their landlord's delivery of service standards.

The government is asking social housing tenants to work in partnership with elected members (Councillors and MPs), to hold their landlords to account and ensure standards are delivered. The scrutiny structures will be determined at local level and will oversee and resolve complaints.



Solving problems locally and cost-effectively - this diagram shows how complaints should work.

Newcastle's approach involves using existing structures for this purpose. For many years, Newcastle Tenants Federation has used its network of tenants and residents associations, citywide policy working groups and Executive to scrutinise the services offered by Your Homes Newcastle (YHN) and the City Council.

Additionally, YHN has developed its own ways of monitoring its services, with elected members being involved through the citywide Tenant Involvement Advisory Group (under review).

What will happen now?

The landlord is required by regulation to provide "timely and useful" information to the scrutiny, to enable it to monitor what the landlord is doing.

“The changes the Bill attempts are radical and will have significant impact on tenants.”

Continued on page 2

Greetings to all council tenants in Newcastle. Here's hoping that you enjoy the summer and have some good weather to get out and about in!

*For those of you who **don't already know**, the Federation has been undergoing a change in recent months. We now have a Chairperson (see back page) and expect a manager to be in place before much longer.*

*Another venture that should soon be up and running is a Facebook page for the Tenants Federation. Keep your eyes open and make **sure you 'like' us**.*

We're asking you to try to come along to our meetings and events, even if just for a short time. Your views are important... they help us to help all council tenants in Newcastle. So, we look forward to seeing as many as possible of you over the coming months.

The views expressed in 'Tenants News' are not necessarily those held by Newcastle Tenants Federation

Continued from front page.

Tenant Scrutiny... More Power to Tenants?

Under the new regime, there will be major changes to the way that tenant's complaints are dealt with, significantly limiting their access to the Ombudsman.

From 2013, the Housing Ombudsman will become responsible for Local Authority Ombudsman complaints. However, the government's idea of solving problems locally is not new. Currently, tenants always try to resolve problems with their landlord, only escalating the complaint to their elected members if not happy. In extreme cases, tenants seek out the Housing Ombudsman's intervention.

The new proposals

Under the proposed new arrangements, tenants will have to be sponsored by their elected members, or agreed designated person if they want to go to the Housing Ombudsman. Commentators are wary of this, because it raises a number of questions, including impartiality, equality and complaints, which may result in a complicated and long-drawn out process.

Newcastle Tenants Federation feels this is a backward step, as the proposals take away social housing tenants voice and choice. The process is likely to put off tenants from complaining against their landlord, as they are already wary of doing so.

What can the regulator do?

All is not doom and gloom. If there are serious failures which are detrimental to the tenant, the regulator (Homes and Communities Agency - HCA) will step in. The HCA will act on feedback or evidence of serious failure from the tenants scrutiny, elected members, Health and Safety Executive (HSE), National Audit Office (NAO) and whistleblowers.

The regulator will be able to use its formal powers to intervene, if it finds the allegations to be serious. However, what is not yet clear is what the government means by "serious detriment".

We'll keep you informed of future developments.

We are updating our records, so... Over the next few weeks, we will be contacting all of our affiliated groups with a series of questions. Your answers will be of great value to us. This will also give your group the opportunity to identify any assistance we can provide.

Federation's AGM takes place



This year, the Federation's Annual General Meeting took place on 8th June. There was a general feeling that it went very well, with 105 tenants attending.

The good turnout was attributed to regular contact with groups, whose members came to find out what is going on in the present climate. Many tenants were anxious about the proposed social housing and welfare reform. They wanted to find out what the impact of the changes would have on their lives. Tenants were also informed of the changes affecting the Federation, the appointment of an independent chairperson and proposals for charitable status. Members were pleased to be kept informed and understood the reason behind the changes.

Most agreed that the content was pitched just right, was easy to understand and not overloaded and there was a relaxed and friendly atmosphere. Monitoring forms were sent out to everyone who attended to see if we are getting it right.

Federation Executive Committee

A new committee was nominated and agreed. These are as follows:

Jenny Cavanagh (*East & West Thorp*), Abu Barrie (*Eastfield Action Group*), Mark Ford (*Byker Village*), Val Schollar (*Kenton Bar*), Mick Lambert (*Kenton Bar*), Ian Carmichael (*Vale House*), June McDonald (*Iris Steedman House*), Joan Coulson (*Iris Steedman House*), Liz Stephenson (*Central Walker*), Julie Hart (*North Slatyford*), Evelyn Bowman (*Burnside Abroad*), Anna Kurkiewicz (*BME Forum*), Arthur Rye (*Central Denton*) and Audrey Shakespeare (*Central Denton*).



Housing Reform proposals - Update

In our last edition, we promised to keep you informed about the ongoing social housing reforms. Well, the consultation document was issued on 7th July and the consultation period will finish on 29th September 2011.

The Government hopes that the most radical shake up of social housing in England for 50 years will create a "fairer system". The Localism Bill will be used to change legislation, allowing the following new social housing standards to be introduced:

Tenure reform - Social housing landlords will be able to make better use of stock by issuing flexible tenancies. Controversial short-term assured tenancies of 2-5 years will be offered to new tenants. The Federation is opposed to this.

Mutual exchange - Landlords will have to ensure access to internet-based exchange schemes, to give tenants the best chance of a match and making the scheme truly national for the first time. This is a positive move, but checks and balances must be there to protect vulnerable households and safeguard communities.

Tenant involvement - Landlord accountability and support for the Tenant Cashback model will be introduced. Social housing tenants can then get more involved in commissioning repairs and maintenance services for their homes. This is

seen as positive by some, but there are fears about health and safety, quality of workmanship and increased costs to landlords from putting botched repairs right.

Rent - Affordable Rent Homes will be introduced, at up to 80% local market rent, generating additional resources to build more. However, the current rent calculation formula for social housing will not change. There are concerns about whether the desired outcomes can be delivered, due to regional disparity in rents. Will funds be provided if some areas are disadvantaged?

Quality of accommodation - By April 2011, the Decent Homes Standard had been met by 92% of registered providers. However, there are still many properties in the country that fail the Standard and, in Newcastle,

7500 properties were not modernised.

We believe that every tenant has the right to a decent home, with double glazing, thermal comfort and modern fittings and fixtures. The stretching of the timescale and removal of final funding to complete Decent Homes work in Newcastle is unfair and upsetting to tenants.

We are in discussion with the Northern Federations and tenants about the reforms. Initial feedback shows growing awareness and concern about the changes, and a need to lobby elected members to oppose the reforms. We will hold a second consultation in September. A questionnaire will be sent out to tenants beforehand, and posted on our website. Please ring or email to confirm your attendance.



Northern Federations United - Leeds, Kirklees, Doncaster, Rotherham and Barnsley Federations in July met at Newcastle, to discuss future strategies for the Tenants Movement to highlight the plight of their members.

Byker tenants vote 'yes' to community trust



Residents of Byker have voted 'yes' to plans for the Grade II* listed estate to become a not-for-profit Community Trust in early 2012. The overall turnout was more than 44%, of which 64.3% voted in favour. The estate could now receive up to £70m of investment over the next 30 years on a range of improvements and repairs.

The result was announced by Newcastle City Council's chief executive Barry Rowland. He thanked Council staff and Your Homes Newcastle (YHN) for their hard work, together with the tenants who campaigned, took part in consultations and made the decision.

A board, consisting of tenants, independent members and representatives of Newcastle City Council and YHN will now be set up to run the estate.

The proposal was backed by Housing Minister Grant Shapps, who said: "Byker residents will

finally be able to take control of their iconic estate. Today's ballot result offers the stability required to attract the much-needed private and public investment to secure the future of Byker."

The new Trust will continue to be managed by YHN, whose chief executive John Lee commented: "We were keen for tenants to be involved in the decision on the future of the estate and we're delighted that they've voted in favour. It's a huge and very exciting step for the estate and my thanks go out to everyone who has been involved in making it happen. Tenants will be at the very heart of the Trust."

Newcastle Tenants Federation will continue to support tenants in Byker to engage with the Trust and other citywide decision makers.

Blucher Village Tenants Gain New Landlord

Leazes Homes, the charitable subsidiary of YHN is to become the new landlord for 91 properties in Blucher Village. The properties were previously managed by Home Group, however tenants voted to go to Leazes Homes after the lease came to an end.

The homes will form part of a proposed portfolio of 350 properties for Leazes Homes, and £1million has been pledged to bring the properties up to decent homes standard.



YHN's Handyperson scheme is for vulnerable older customers (aged over 60) who need small household tasks doing - minor plumbing and joinery repairs, installing grab rails, locks or security chains, changing light bulbs, plugs or fuses and fixing or replacing door bells.

You must be in receipt of Council Tax Benefit or pension credit guarantee. If you think you are eligible and need a service carried out, call Anchor on **(0191) 495 6176** or e-mail: **newgatstayingput@anchor.org.uk**

Around & About...

Our 'Big Society' - Tenants & Residents Associations in action

Tenants and residents associations (TARAs) across the city have been working hard in partnership with the Council, elected members, YHN, Police and voluntary organisations. They hope to improve services within their communities, saving money for both the Government and Council.

TARAs have provided social activities and befriending for their members, reducing isolation and improving general wellbeing. They advised service providers on where things were going wrong and offered solutions to put things right.



Members of the Tenants Federation's Executive Committee at the Eastfield Family Fun Day.

Eastfield Family Fun Day - best ever



On Saturday 30th July, Eastfield Action Group (in association with East End Juniors Football Club and Milecastle House) held their 7th - biggest and best! - free family fun day. Around 2,000 people took part, from Walkergate, Walker and even Byker, Newbiggin Hall, Kenton and Wallsend.

The event promoted sports, healthy living and community cohesion. Participants were treated to funfair rides, assault courses, fun walk, music, dance, football, tombolas and raffles - something for everyone.

On the day, there was support from Neighbourhood Services,

Northumbria Police, Housing and Concierge Services and members of the Federation Executive Committee.

Cllr Maureen Lawson had this to say afterwards: *"The event was absolutely brilliant, the atmosphere was good and there was no trouble at all. All I could hear were children saying 'mum, can I go on this?' It was a huge success, bigger and better organised. We could not have done it were it not for our Federation. They came to our aid at short notice, assisting with paperwork and planning and helping us raise £11,000."*

Charlie Scott, from East End Juniors FC says: *"This was the biggest event we have ever organised and we could not have done it without the help of Karen Harrison of Newcastle Tenants Federation."*

News from..... local Tenants & Residents Groups

Thumbs up to New Mills



New Mills Estate in Westgate Ward has taken the bold step to form a TARA after six months of work to improve local services. Cllr Joanne Kingsland has given significant support, vowing to continue helping the group to fight for improvements to make their neighbourhood the jewel it once was.

Since February, the group has worked with YHN, the Council and the Tenants Federation. A walkabout has been held, leading to an action plan to clean the estate, collect rubbish and increase Neighbourhood Warden patrols and shrub maintenance. The Council and YHN have agreed funding for an environmental improvement project. The new committee now has big dreams, including an annual 'best kept garden' competition.

Vale House - All that glitters is not gold!

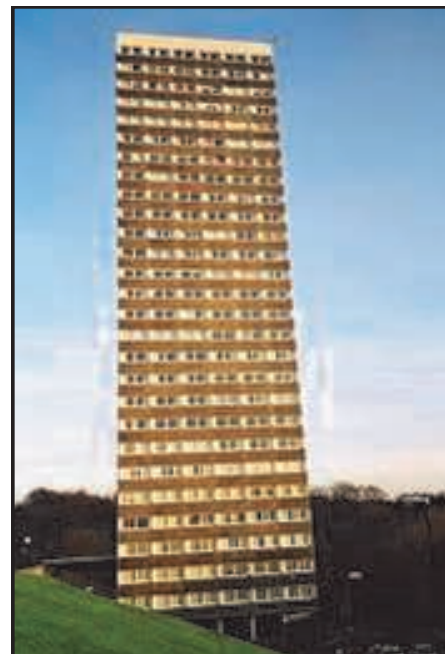
Vale House in Jesmond Vale, East Newcastle was built in 1968 and is home to Vale House Tenants Association.

The Chairperson, Ian Carmichael says: *"Although a desirable location, it is very isolated and the only Council owned building in the vicinity. There are no shops within easy walking distance and the bus service leaves a lot to be desired. Residents range in age from 55 to 97 years and a few, who moved in 1968, still live here. The Tenants Association was formed in the early 1990s and formulated a constitution in 1995, when it affiliated to Newcastle Tenants Federation.*

The building has changed over the years and was recently refurbished under Decent Homes, with new windows, kitchens, bathrooms and toilets. Window restrictors caused some consternation, but this has been rectified amicably on both sides.

We persuaded YHN to fit an automatic door on the 3rd floor lobby, giving easier access to older residents and have also obtained more recycling bins, which have been a great success. Negotiations are underway for a community flat and we are still hoping to persuade the Council to clear the approach roads of snow when necessary.

We have arranged a garden party for the residents in August, which we hope will be a great success after the tribulations of last winter. Although we moan and complain at times, we are a tight knit community who treasure living in Vale House."



Vale House, the tallest tower block in Newcastle.

More news from 'Around & About' overleaf

News from local Tenants & Residents Groups Around & About...

Iris Steedman House are celebrating success!

Iris Steedman tenants group in Westgate Ward has been very active, organising social activities for its members and fighting for improvements to their sheltered scheme.

Following a walkabout in June, the group wrote a petition. One member, June McDonald, said: *"The Federation contacted YHN, as the residents were concerned about the deteriorating external areas at the sheltered housing scheme.*



The issues were ground maintenance and outstanding repairs to fencing and guttering, etc. Since being contacted by the Federation Jane Anderson, the Scheme's Manager has been very helpful in ensuring that outstanding work has been completed.

Thank you, Tenants Federation and Thank you, Jane, for your consideration".

* * * * *

Campaigning in Central Walker

With the help of the Tenants Federation, Central Walker Tenants and Residents Association has campaigned for new paths.

A tenant said: "At last, after four years of campaigning the residents of Wharrier Street bungalows in Walker have got new pathways and new, larger steps with yellow safety strips for easier visibility. It makes the area so much tidier. The next campaign is for new railings to finish the job.

It took nearly 18 months to get areas near the bus stops raised, then another ten months to get the bus stop sign moved. Persistence has paid off and it was worth it to allow everyone to get on and off buses more easily."

Denton Park House in the news again!

Denton Park House Tenants Association is continuing to keep up the good work.

The group is finally going to get a community flat after seven long years of lobbying YHN. Although no date has been set, they have been told that the next vacant two-bed flat will be converted for this purpose.

* * * * *

Hobby Room to re-open in Byker Wall

Byker Village Tenants and Residents Association has been the driving force behind the refurbishment of a community room on the estate.

The tenants group had tried for about three years to get the 'hobby room' re-opened but nobody knew who had the keys. Eventually they were tracked down and Frank Haslam Milan (FHM) agreed to come and do all the work.

The room is due to be opened very soon. It will be used for a variety of events, including breakfast clubs, bingo, tenants' meetings and toddler groups.

OPEN LETTER TO TENANTS

Our Chairperson, Marion Talbot recently wrote the following letter to all of our affiliated tenants and residents associations:

*"We have received recently complaints in connection with **services provided by the Tenants' Federation and who has access to our services.** Some of the views expressed in these complaints have also been in contravention of our Equal Opportunities Policy and Code of Conduct for members.*

The Federation aims to ensure that, in all areas of its responsibility, no one is disadvantaged because of sex, race, disability, religion/belief, age, marital status, domestic circumstances, sexual orientation, trade union activities and economic background. The city has a diverse cultural background and no one should be disadvantaged because of who they are. Steps will therefore be taken to include the harder to reach communities in all activities of the Federation.

We are committed to making sure that tenants are supported within reasonable means to attend meetings and activities organised by the Federation. It is our policy that we will on request provide support by:

- reimbursing people for their bus tickets
- provide childcare and crèche facilities
- provide interpreters
- provide taxis for disabled tenants

The Federation is committed to working with all tenants across the city and protecting its employees. As an organisation we have a duty of care to the staff we employ. To this end we strive to ensure that our employees work in a safe environment free from harassment, violence and abuse and unacceptable behaviour to our employees will not be tolerated.

*The Federation has a complaints and grievance procedure in place for tenants to use if they are not happy with the way we **do things.** If member's behaviour or actions are in breach of our Equal Opportunity Policy and Code of Conduct for **member's action can and will be taken.***

*We are committed to putting things right if we get it wrong **and encourage feedback from our members."***

Kind regards

Marion Talbot - Chair, on behalf of the Federation

Thanks from the Federation

Messages of support for the Federation's work are always welcome.

One of our affiliated groups recently emailed us, saying:

***"Over the past 30+** years the service that we have received from the Tenants Federation has been excellent.*

No matter who the staff were, they have always been there with excellent advice, dealt with problems we have had efficiently and training is done in a easy to understand format. Staff are always approachable and friendly - not only staff but volunteers have put many hours in to set up correct policies and procedures. So please keep up the good work."

The staff here at the Federation would like to thank you all for your support and let you know that we really appreciate your comments.

Local Offers Scrutiny

Tenants put housing services under the microscope

Local Offers? What?

Some tenants may be aware of the existence of the 'local offers' that were introduced by YHN towards the end of last year. They followed on from consultation with tenants and leaseholders throughout the summer of 2010.

Local offers are the brainchild of the axed Tenant Services Authority and are aimed at driving up improvements in service provision within the social housing sector. Social housing providers are required to ask their tenants how they expect services to be provided and what targets they should be aiming at. Landlords are required to report to their tenants on how they are performing against their local offers every year.

There have been many changes since last year, but the local offers remain and tenants are required to scrutinise how they are being delivered by their landlords.

Your Homes Newcastle has produced and publicised local offers on care services, concierge, HASBET, housing management, property maintenance, investment delivery and customer Involvement (*see insert for details*).



The Federation, YHN and the City Council have agreed that, during this year monitoring the performance of the local offers will be carried out by YHN and the Federation. We, at the Federation will use our existing structures (tenants and residents associations, working groups and Executive Committee) to monitor YHN's performance.

YHN, on the other hand, will use their own tenant involvement structures for monitoring. YHN is committed to delivering excellent services to all its tenants and is willing to learn from mistakes and putting things right.

The Federation is currently collecting evidence on how the offers are being implemented. We are asking our members to give us feedback by answering questions in the enclosed survey or visiting our website to complete an online survey.

Closing date for returning surveys is 1st September 2011. Respondents will be entered in a prize draw competition.

Calling all tenants!!!



TAROE

(Tenants and Residents Organisations of England)

are holding their National Conference and AGM

on

**Wednesday
26th October 2011**

9.30am - 4pm

(At Walsall Football Club, Bank's Stadium, Walsall)

This conference is FREE to tenants.

If you and members of your Tenants and Residents Association would like to attend, please contact

Viv Pruis

on 232 1371

so that we can make travel arrangements.

Tenants celebrate victory

No window restrictors for multi-storey blocks in Newcastle

In July, our tenant representatives on the Living in Flats working group and Investment Forum were celebrating the news that they had influenced YHN's Board to overturn a decision to install window limiters in tower blocks.

Our reps were against the YHN Board decision in October 2010 to fit windows limiters in tower blocks, following a fatal fall by a tenant in the west end of the City. The limiter caused a lot of upset among tenants, because it limited window opening to 100 mm (four inches).

Our reps gathered feedback from their tenants and residents associations, to prepare their case to YHN. They challenged YHN on the grounds that there was no legal justification under health and safety legislation to install window limiters in tenant's homes. They felt that restricting opening would impact on their quality of life, by not allowing adequate ventilation, especially during hot months and to get rid of cooking steam.

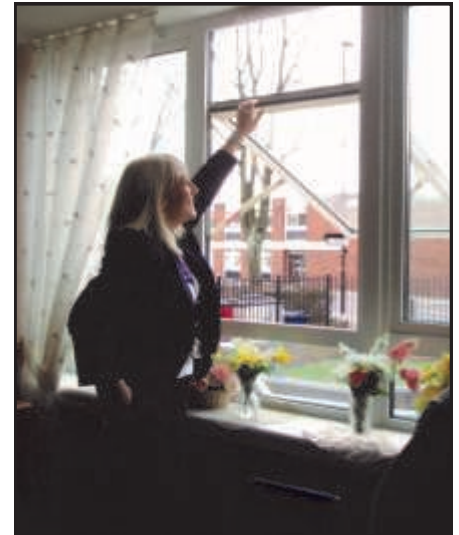
Reps argued that tenants should retain the responsibility to operate the windows safely. YHN attempted to address some of the concerns raised about cleaning windows by trialling a window cleaning

service at Vale House. However, this idea proved unpopular with tenants, who were also not prepared to pay for the service.

YHN will not be continuing with the programme of installing window limiters.

Instead, they will be communicating with all tenants in tower blocks, to offer advice on operating the windows safely. Tenants who have already had the limiter fitted will have them removed, or will be provided with a key to release the limiter.

Advice will also be given on safe operation of the windows. Newcastle Tenants Federation applauds this decision, as it shows the YHN Board is listening to tenants.



Discussions are ongoing with the Federation, Living in Flats and Investment Forum working groups about information packs for tenants living in high-rise flats, together with advice to current and future tenants about safe operation of their windows.

YHN's Investment Delivery team will be visiting any tenants who want further advice or a demonstration of how the window operates.



I have always said that what tenants say they want in their home should be listened to because nobody knows better than a tenant. As for the window restrictors, I believe this is a great victory for tenants and just goes to show the power behind a tenant movement.

The Living in Flats Group should continue to meet to bring these things to the attention of others, and that way all tenants of the City will have a bigger and better voice.



Jenny Cavanagh, Fed Exec

New Chairperson for Federation


At the beginning of June, Newcastle Tenants Federation appointed an independent Chairperson to lead the organisation through this time of change.



Marion Talbot has worked in the statutory, voluntary and private sectors, joining the Audit Commission in 2000 from Newcastle City Council. She has a wide range of experience, including anti poverty strategies, partnership working, community engagement, equality and diversity and community cohesion.

Training News

How the Council works and how to influence it

Free  Course for people interested in how the council works, its decision making processes and how to engage and influence these

This half day course will help you to:

- ◆ Gain a better understanding of Council processes
- ◆ Understand how the Council works and its structures
- ◆ Develop understanding of political structures within the city
- ◆ Gain knowledge on how to be more engaged with wards and councillors
- ◆ Understand Scrutiny, its role and how to intervene in the decision making process

The course will run on **Monday 26th September** at the UNISON regional office, 140-150 Pilgrim Street, Newcastle.

It will start at 9.30am and finish at 2pm. Tea/coffee and buffet sandwiches will be provided.

If you are interested, please contact the Tenants Federation on **232 1371** or email vivienp@newcastletenantsfed.org.uk

(Or you can telephone Emma Lipscombe at Unison, on 211 6980 for further information.)

Dates For
Your Diary



- Consultation - Social Housing Reform

Mon 19 September 2011

10am - 2pm

BME Forum

Wed 21 September 2011

5.30pm (pre-meeting)

6pm (full meeting)

Investment Forum

Thurs 29 September 2011

10.30am (pre-meeting)

11.30am (full meeting)

Repairs Development

Wed 5 October 2011

10.30am (pre-meeting)

11.30am (full meeting)

- Consultation - ASB: A new mandatory power of possession for antisocial behaviour

Tues 18 October 2011

10am - 12noon,

2pm - 4pm or 6pm - 8pm

Living in Flats

Wed 19 October 2011

10.30am (pre-meeting)

11.30am (full meeting)

Meetings are held in the
Federation's offices, Ground
Floor, 63 Westgate Road