

**Client: West Kent**  
**Project: In & Around**

## **Headline: Mission Impossible?**

**Intro: How can a housing association like West Kent continue to build new homes, create sustainable communities and provide support to those most in need in today's economic climate? *In&Around* asks our Chief Executive, Frank Czarnowski.**

**Body:** There is something very un-British about someone who is so consistently positive. We're, by and large, a 'glass half empty' kind of country. Whether it's the weather or the trains, we do like something to complain about. Right now, most public sector organisations have a good deal that they could quite justifiably complain about.

What's the point?, says the highly positive Frank. "We all knew this was coming. It's no big surprise. In a strange way, it has made us reassess and see that we need to look forward, not back. We've stopped talking about our three stars and we now talk about what we need to do to give our residents the type and level of service they want – and find ways of working with them to deliver those services."

Yes, we say, but research shows that we are building less new housing as a nation than any time since 1947. That must be difficult for a social housing provider who's faced with a growing list of people with pressing housing needs? "Of course," says Frank. "But we have always been fiscally responsibly as an organisation so that even through the toughest times in the past 20 years we have been able to invest some of our surplus to meet our new build obligations. In fact, we have just had our bid for developing Affordable Rents accepted by the government."

Over the next three years, we will be delivering 368 new homes under the scheme across the regions where we now operate. Surprisingly, we are only contracted to deliver 38 new properties in Sevenoaks itself. Frank explains: "In all, there is only planning permission for 145 new homes in Sevenoaks over the period so we have been able to secure a significant proportion of that."

Isn't Affordable Rents an oxymoron? "I can see that setting rents at 80% of the private rental could cause problems for some people – especially in the South East where there's been such a disparity between private and social rents. The danger is that it deepens the benefit trap where the fear of not meeting the rent becomes a greater impediment to finding employment. It will be for us to find ways to help our residents overcome this obstacle," says Frank.

But, according to Frank, there's reason to be optimistic: "Affordable Rents will open up the social housing sector to people who may not have considered it before. Young couples, for instance, who can't get a foot on the property ladder have now got access to high quality homes that they can afford. With a mix of tenure types, we can help develop mixed income communities that will be more sustainable and, with hope, close the social divide between rich and poor."

So the move away from lifetime tenancies is a positive step? "To be honest, I don't think it will make all that much difference," says Frank. "As a housing association, we still have the control to offer the tenancy type we think correct on a case-by-case basis – whether that's a fixed or a lifetime tenancy. Where fixed tenancies might help is in giving us the flexibility to address the

under-utilisation of our properties. If we're able to work with residents to provide homes that more closely match their needs, we'd be able to find homes for more people with our existing stock.”

What about older people and people in supported accommodation, how will the current changes affect them? “There's no doubt in my mind that the changes to Supporting People funding – and how we deal with an ageing population as a whole – is going to be our greatest challenge. The baby boomer generation now accounts for one quarter of the UK population. As we get older, our needs increase. At the same time, there's very little central funding to address this issue. We have to ask ourselves very serious questions right now about how we housing and support the older people in our community in the future,” says Frank.

The answer? “There's no easy answer,” comments Frank. “We are currently involved in a number of projects to ensure our sheltered homes meet the needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We want older people to enjoy independent and fulfilling lives. Our job now is to reassess the services we deliver and how we deliver them so that everyone gets the level of service that's right for them. I'm sure that this is not a task we can undertake alone. It will only happen through finding new and creative ways of working with our stakeholders, other local agencies and voluntary organisations.”

“In all of this, the one set of people who can't suffer are our residents. Whatever the future brings and whatever the shape of the new services we deliver, our first and driving commitment is to them,” Frank states.

(Words: 851)

### **Box 1: Building Affordable Homes**

Over the next three years, our successful new development bid for Affordable Rent properties is:

<b>Sevenoaks</b>	39
<b>Maidstone</b>	82
<b>Tunbridge and Malling</b>	94
<b>Medway</b>	85
<b>Ashford</b>	58

### **Box 2: Want to know more**

If you have any questions you'd like to ask Frank, please call 01732 749415 or email [frank.czarnowski@wkha.org.uk](mailto:frank.czarnowski@wkha.org.uk)