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Property turned into new homes

PECKHAM: An army of 350 volunteering tradesmen have turned an abandoned property into a newly renovated home for vulnerable women.

Employees of huge businesses like Bloomberg, Wells Fargo and Genworth donated hours of their time to complete the property in King's Grove, Peckham, providing a new home for two families.

David Clare, Business Development Manager for Habitat for Humanity, the housing charity that ran the project, said: "We are delighted. This is our thirtieth renovation project. We plan to carry out more like this in London and beyond."

The two families who are moving in own almost nothing and Habitat for Humanity is now appealing for help to furnish the property.

The house will be officially opened on Thursday next week to coincide with National Empty Homes Week.

Habitat for Humanity works all over the world renovating and building homes, but its UK work is based in Gordon Road in Peckham.

For more information visit <http://habitatforhumanitygbhomes.org.uk/>

MP defends renting office from party

Hughes pays £500 a month from expenses

By Oliver Pugh

oliver@southwarknews.co.uk

SIMON HUGHES is one of the many MPs who have paid taxpayers' money to their local party to rent their office.

Though critics have attacked the practice as "back-door funding" Mr Hughes said the money was used only to pay for his proportion of the office rent.

He claims around £500 a month in Parliamentary expenses and pays the money to the Bermondsey and Old Southwark Liberal Democrats, which in turn pays rent to the freeholders of the building in the Blue Market.

Mr Hughes said the proportion he has to pay was determined by an independent surveyor.

The Bermondsey MP said: "As long as MPs are not using public money to

subsidise particular parties it makes sense to share services in that way.

"We're filling an office in the Blue while a lot of offices are empty. For the whole of my time as an MP, apart from a couple of minutes at the beginning, I've had an office in my constituency.

"It's a completely scandalous thing that the other MPs [in Southwark] have never had an office."

The Commons' expenses watchdog is now set to investigate the practice of allowing MPs to rent offices from their constituency parties.

Sir Ian Kennedy, chairman of the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority (IPSA), said: "We know that MPs renting offices from their local party is a contentious issue.

"To my mind, there are two aspects which need consideration. The first is value for money. We have a safety check designed to meet that concern, which is the need for an independent valuation confirming rent is being paid at the market rate.

"And there is the quite separate issue of whether taxpayers' money is being used to fund political activities."



Office in the Blue: Simon Hughes MP

Almost 24,000 taken to court over council tax bills this year

'Only fair to those who pay their tax' says Finance boss

By Reena Kumar

reena@southwarknews.co.uk

SOUTHWARK COUNCIL summonsed almost 24,000 residents to court for avoiding their council tax bill this year.

Figures obtained by the Liberal Democrat group also revealed that an additional 3,961 locals were hauled to court on Friday, a month after almost 6,000 residents faced the same fate.

Thousands of those summonsed had lost their council tax benefit in April, but 2,500 of those called to court had not previously received the benefit.

Bailiff action has not yet been taken on locals who were ordered to pay their full bill following their court appearance on October 18, and 51 cases were adjourned from this date.

The Lib Dems claim it has cost Southwark Council over £1.5m

taking residents to court, with each summons costing £65. This figure has not been verified by the council.

Protesters were outraged by Southwark's action after the government axed council tax benefit as part of cuts to the welfare budget in April. Before this happened, 25,000 households in Southwark relied on the exemption.

Canada Water resident Cathy Edgar, who was summonsed to court last month, said the welfare reform was putting a huge strain on her family:

"I'm terrified of becoming homeless, on top of the council tax I have the bedroom tax, it's a worry they are putting on poor people.

"It's like a spiral, you just keep going down. I feel like it's coming at me from every direction. They will take £5 from my Job Seekers Allowance every two weeks to pay for the council tax."

Leader of Southwark Council's Liberal Democrat Group Cllr Anood Al-Samerai said: "The council shouldn't have got itself in this position in the first place by cutting council tax support, which was a cynical political move by Labour pushing hundreds low income

households into arrears to make a point about government cuts.

"On top of that, they put £800,000 into a supposed 'hardship' fund but so far have only spent £52,000 of it whilst the rest is sitting in the council's bank account collecting interest." In total 491 hard up people have applied for help through the council's hardship fund and 297 of these have been successful.

Cllr Richard Livingstone, Cabinet Member for Finance and Resources, said that the council was continuing to pursue unpaid council tax because it was only fair to those who did pay their bills every month to ensure that others did the same.

"The council did not decide lightly to ask some residents to pay council tax for the first time," he added.

"National changes to welfare reform mean that had we not passed this cost on, as most councils have, we would have had to take the money from other services.

"However, we remain committed to helping any resident struggling financially through our hardship fund, and we would urge anyone experiencing difficulties in paying their council tax to get in touch with us."

PECKHAM



Bee creates a buzz

By Amelia Burr

amelia@southwarknews.co.uk

AMATEUR photographer, Penny Frith, is buzzing after her photo of a Solitary Bee taken in Warwick Gardens in Peckham won an award and will now appear in a calendar.

Penny has spent three years photographing and recording insects in the park as a distraction from her

day job as a graphic designer.

Penny, 51, of Choumert Road, Peckham, was delighted when her photograph was selected ahead of 1,300 others submitted from all over the world for this year's Buglife Calendar.

She said: "I was really pleased because the Solitary Bee is less well known. For me it's about inspiring people to go out and have a look at what's out there."