

Thanet Landlords' Focus Group

Working for landlords in partnership with Thanet District Council



Wednesday 02 September 2015

Council Chamber, Thanet District Council, Cecil Street, Margate, Kent, CT9 1XZ

Meeting notes

In attendance:

Landlord representatives

Teresa Bartlett (Chair)

Hugh Horton

Lynne Sutton

Colin Mately

Marion Money

Keith Sharpe

Diane Solly

Council representatives

Richard Hopkins (Housing Regeneration)

Bethan Jones (Housing Regeneration)

Rebecca Pavlou (Housing Options)

Louise Therman-Newell (Housing Options)

Andrew Croucher (EK Services)

Mark Gillmore (EK Services)

Jasmine Rose (Waste & Recycling)

Apologies : Sara Wade; Kiren Patel; Steve Morgan

1. Welcome and Introductions

The group gave a warm welcome to a new member, Keith Sharpe (KS). KS is a landlord of property in Margate. TB informed members that Lucy Wilkes has resigned from the group due to family commitments. As a result, there are currently 13 elected members, leaving two available places. TB requested that all members raise awareness of the group with any local landlords or agents that they feel would be interested in becoming a member. It was agreed that the places would also be advertised on the TDC website.

2. Minutes of last meeting

The minutes of the previous meeting were agreed and accepted by the group.

3. Housing Options: Landlord Liaison Officers update

RP explained that the Landlord Liaison Officer service is dedicated to supporting agents, landlords and tenants. Landlord Liaison Officers (LLOs) are working pro-actively to gain referrals into the service. LS highlighted the positive experience she has had when working with the LLO service and said that she has found the LLOs to be very efficient and quick to respond to queries. RP identified herself and Louise Therman-Newell as the two current LLOs tasked with preventing homelessness, following a recent re-shuffle of staff.

RP informed the group that an email with details of the Help to Move Scheme had been circulated to letting agents within Thanet.

LS informed the group that a number of individuals referred for Tenant Referencing had been turned away recently by the Gateway. RH advised that this should not be the case and that it would be followed up with the appropriate manager. RH explained that if those applying for Tenant Referencing do not have photographs, they can be taken at the Gateway. RH added

that the Tenant Referencing Scheme allows the council to check information about tenants which includes checking on credit and debt history, criminal activity, anti-social behaviour and tenancy breaches or refusals.

4. Housing benefit/council tax benefit update

AC informed the group that Matthew Goodbun had recently been appointed as a Welfare Reform & Project Officer. The remit of the role will cover welfare reform as well as Universal Credit (UC). AC added that Matthew will be invited to attend future meetings.

AC commented that since the previous meeting there had been a change in Government and Budget.

Budget

AC advised the group that a number of different measures were announced in the Budget that may have an impact on those receiving or wanting to apply for Housing Benefit and/or Council Tax. There will be a four year freeze to certain working age benefits, including tax credits, local housing allowance rates and child benefit. AC added that there will be a lowering of the benefit cap from £26,000 to £20,000 for couples and lone parents and £13,000 for single claimants. AC explained that Housing Benefit backdating will be restricted to a maximum of 4 weeks, whereas it is currently 6 months. Child Tax Credits and Housing Benefit will be limited to account for a maximum of 2 children to children born after 2017. AC added that if there is a third child they will not receive an increase. AC informed the group that Family Premium will be removed from Housing Benefit from April 2016 for new applicants. MG added that claimants should be challenging this. AC informed the group that the entitlement for Housing Benefit for 18-20 year olds will be removed. AC added that this will be likely to happen in 2017 and there will be exemptions planned.

TB asked if there will be a change of Council Tax when properties are empty. AC advised the group to speak to councillors regarding this, as policy states that councillors are to decide. MM suggested that TB be a representative for the group on this matter.

Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP)

AC informed the group that funding for DHP will be cut for 2015-2016. EK Services will be reviewing their procedures for the year and will be working closely with LLOs in order to support applicants in maintaining their current tenancies and help with rent arrears where it could result in securing a longer tenancy.

Universal Credit (UC)

AC informed the group that Thanet is part of tranche three of the national rollout of UC and will go live on 12 October 2015 for some new claimants. AC explained the theory is that applicants will claim online, however, the application process is some way off being completed. AC informed the group that the impact on landlords will be that one monthly payment will be given to one person within a household, and that person will be responsible to manage their own payments. AC advised that if landlords are concerned about not receiving their rent, they can apply to the DWP for payments to be made directly to the landlords. MM informed the group that DWP will need landlords to submit a claim for Alternative Payment Arrangements (APA), in writing and will not discuss claims with landlords. MM added that the DWP will only accept documents through a trusted email such as GCSX.gov.uk. MG informed the group that further information relating to APA under UC, and trusted email arrangements would be circulated to the group.

KS asked if those in receipt of state pension will be affected by UC. AC confirmed that those receiving state pension will be untouched by UC and any of the other cuts. MG added that all working individuals should have migrated onto the UC system by 2020.

5. Waste management in communal areas

Jasmin Rose has recently been appointed as an Environmental Education Officer. JR explained that her role will include working with landlords of properties where there is a persistent problem with waste. JR added that she will provide advice and guidance to landlords and tenants, and in particular look at suitable arrangements for waste management and look at whether recycling is a feasible option at the property. JR asked the group if a guidance document for landlords and tenants on waste and recycling would be useful. The group agreed that this would be a useful tool.

DS raised the question of whether seagull bags could be emptied more frequently. JR advised the group that she is currently working on a re-launch of an educational campaign aimed at tenants and residents to ensure that seagull bags are used correctly. The campaign will start in Ramsgate and then be rolled out across Thanet. JR added that seagull bags are required but that tenants and residents require further education in order to encourage them to use them correctly. KS asked how often the seagull bags are collected. JR informed the group that this depends on the area, and that it can be weekly or fortnightly depending on demand. JR added that the collection for the selective licensing area is weekly.

JR informed the group that a Neighbourhood Recycling Scheme has been set up for residents who live in the Cliftonville area. The scheme is facilitated by both the council and residents to allow individuals to opt in to receive a kerbside recycling collection. At present, the percentage of waste in Thanet which is recycled is 34%. JR informed the group that the aim is to increase the amount of waste which is recycled but to also encourage the quality of recycling.

6. Matters for discussion raised by:

(a) Hugh Horton

HH asked how TDC expect the Right to Rent proposals from the Government to be implemented locally.

RH informed the group that a response had not been provided as the Immigration Officer had not been available. RH added that a member of the MTF had passed on guidance documents which members may find useful. It was agreed that BJ would circulate the guidance documents to members of the Focus Group.

MM advised that an evaluation zone had been operating in Birmingham City Council where landlords have had to check that someone has the right to rent before letting them a property. From 1 February 2016 this will apply to landlords of properties throughout England. MM added that if a landlord does not check an individual's documentation they must have a statutory excuse for not doing so. MM advised that landlords should be looking at individual's passport or driving licence if they are from an EEA country. MM added that landlords are to keep documentation for 12 months.

7. Selective Licensing update (existing scheme)

RH informed the group that the current Selective Licensing scheme will expire on 20 April 2016, and the Housing Regeneration Team will aim to ensure that all licensable properties within the area are licensed by this date.

RH advised the group that of 2100 properties that require a selective licence, 2000 are now subject to a licence or an application that is being processed. There have been fewer prosecutions against landlords operating unlicensed properties of late, however; the council have successfully prosecuted a landlord for failing to comply with the requirements of three Improvement Notices recently. The landlord received fines totalling £13,570.

The Housing Regeneration Team is undertaking an inspection programme in order to attempt to inspect as many licensed properties as possible by the end of the scheme. To date, 923 inspections have been carried out; of which almost two thirds have revealed breaches of the licence conditions.

RH informed the group that the council can apply to the First-Tier Property Chamber (Residential Property) for Rent Repayment Orders (RROs), where an owner has been in receipt of housing benefit payments and has failed to comply with the scheme. To date, six RROs have been agreed at the sum equivalent to 12 months of housing benefit payments. One landlord in particular is required to pay back £6,100.

8. Selective Licensing (Public Consultation)

The public consultation on the proposal to make a further selective licensing designation started on the 17 August and will end on 26 October 2015. RH explained that the designated area is a problematic area with entrenched problems that arose out of many years of socio-economic change. However, since the selective licensing scheme was introduced, anti-social behaviour has declined by 28.7%. RH added that selective licensing cannot be said to be entirely responsible for the decline, the council believes it has made a significant contribution. TB asked if the figure was based on individuals reporting anti-social behaviour to the Margate Task Force (MTF). RH explained that the figure is based on reports of ASB to both the Police and the council's Community Safety Team.

RH informed the group that it is proposed that the designated area will remain largely the same, however following consultation with relevant council departments and MTF, some changes have been proposed. It is proposed that parts of Trinity Square and Northdown Road will be included. RH added that around 27% of occupiers from dwellings from these roads have complained to the council about their housing conditions in the past five years. It is proposed that the new designation will start on 21 April 2016, the day after the current scheme ends. RH informed the group that the response to the consultation has so far been high. The consultation document can be downloaded from the TDC website in PDF format. RH added that a report will be submitted to cabinet in January 2016 for their consideration and to decide if a new designation will be made.

TB asked what the cost of licensing will be if a new designation is made. RH explained that the selective licensing fees will be reduced and those who are accredited with the National Landlords Association (NLA) and the Kent Landlord Accreditation Scheme (KLAS) would benefit from a discounted fee. RH explained that the standard licence application fee would be £389 for accredited landlords and £439 for non-accredited landlords. If a valid licence application was to be made at least six weeks before the current licence expires, then the fee for an accredited would be £345 and £395 for non-accredited landlords. RH explained that if a landlord who lets two or more flats within the same building and is also the freeholder, the fee for the first flat for an accredited landlord would be £389 and the fee for each additional flat would be £136. If the landlord is not accredited then the fee for the first flat would be £439 and £136 for each additional flat. The fees would be further reduced if a landlord makes an early renewal application, at least six weeks before the current licence is due to expire. RH added that full details on the proposed fees are included on page 16 of the proposal document.

KS asked if the application form would remain the same. RH informed the group that applications must be submitted by law; however, in order to simplify the process it may be

possible for the Housing Regeneration Team to send a copy of the original application form back to the landlord, for updating and re-submission.

RH encouraged members to provide a joint response to the public consultation. It was agreed that TB would send an email to members requesting their responses.

9. Smoke alarms in rented accommodation

RH informed the group that the Smoke and Carbon Monoxide Alarm (England) Regulations 2015 are due to come into force on 01 October 2015. The Regulations require landlords to provide and install smoke detection on each floor of a property where there is a habitable room and to provide a carbon monoxide detector in each room where there is a solid fuel appliance. RH explained that TDC along with the Kent Fire & Rescue Service will be providing an event to provide information to landlords on how the Regulations will affect them, and to give away free smoke alarms and carbon monoxide alarms. RH informed the group that the event will be held in Thanet on 23 September 2015. It was agreed that BJ would send an email to members with a link to book a place at the event.

10. Landlord Event 2015 feedback

The group agreed that the Landlord Event was a success, with RH confirming that it was well attended this year. RH questioned whether the group feel future events should be held at St Peters Church Hall or a different venue. TB explained that attendees she had spoken to had found the venue harder to get to than previous venues. RH explained that the venue has free parking and space available in the hall for information stands.

11. Any other business

In response to the question raised by Stuart Clifton, MM informed the group that in order to comment it would be beneficial to see both transcripts of the cases. MM added that with regards to a possession case, a care of address cannot be used. MM informed the group that she would seek advice from the advice line and further comments from the NLA. TB is to send the question to MM by email.

End: 4.30pm

Summary of Actions:

Action	Timescale	Lead
Provide and circulate further information relating to Alternative Payment Arrangements	3 December 2015	Mark Gilmore / Bethan Jones
Circulate guidance documents on the Right to Rent	3 December 2015	Bethan Jones
Send an email advising members on how to book a place at the TDC and Kent Fire & Rescue Service' joint event	22 September 2015	Bethan Jones

Chair: Teresa Bartlett

Please direct any enquiries to:

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